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Sport97

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Hugo Young

Neither extreme fear nor extravagant hope

This section, page 13

Meet Joe Bloggs, Major's Chancellor

Michael White
Political Editor

JOHN Major's Cabinet wasted another vital day of their election campaign fightback when they spent much of yesterday in open disarray over the Prime Minister's impromptu offer of a free Commons vote on the European single currency.

To the unbridled delight of Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown, Mr Major's announcement that Conservative backbenchers will get a free vote if he ever decides to join the euro left his two senior lieutenants, Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke, floundering over what was clearly a further sop to the Euro-sceptic insurgency sweeping through the Tory ranks.

Campaigning in the West Country the Chancellor revealed he had not been told in advance. So did fellow Cabinet members Michael Portillo and Stephen Dorrell. And hours after Mr Major had firmed up his tentative mid-morning suggestion as "the best way forward," his deputy, Mr Heseltine, was still dismissing it as "a possibility."

In a testy Radio 4 interview in which he complained of "a sort of feeding fever in Fleet Street on these issues" Mr Heseltine denied that Mr Major was desperately "making policy on the hoof." He said a Commons vote — which would precede a nationwide referendum — was "an event some time off that is surrounded by endless hypothetical questions."

Mr Major was dismissive about acting alone, rather than apologetic. "When I was asked the question in a press conference this morning, if I had replied to the question and said 'I'm frightfully sorry that's a very interesting question but I'd better go and ask Ken Clarke or Joe Bloggs or someone else before I give you an answer' — that may be the way the Labour Party operates, it's not the way I operate," he said.

With under two weeks left to polling day and his party still 18 per cent behind Labour in the latest Harris/Independent poll, the Prime Minister's intention had been to turn the spotlight on Tony Blair's inexperience in European negotiation and his willingness to sell out British interests at the Amsterdam summit on June 16-17.

But 24 hours after an impassioned defence of his "wait and see" policy on European monetary union Mr Major was also seeking to reunite his divided party.

Tory officials were clearly caught on the hop by his candid reply to a journalist's question about a free vote that might avoid repeating the protracted two-year battle over the Maastricht treaty when up to 41 Conservatives defied a three-line whip.

"Of course it's a possibility as far as backbenchers are concerned," he said, stressing that, whatever decision was taken "near the time," ministers would be bound by collective responsibility. The precedent hastily retrieved by party spin doctors was Edward *Heath's reluctant free* vote on the 1971 bill which first took Britain into Europe.

Tory MPs on both sides of the Euro-divide from Edwina Currie to Sir Teddy Taylor welcomed the offer. Some urged the Cabinet to keep pressing the issue this weekend to put the heat on Labour. "Let the fuse burn. Once we get through the pain barrier of people saying we're divided we can force Labour to flip-flop again," said one.

Ironically, Labour's stance on how to handle a single *currency vote is what it was in* 1971 when Harold Wilson imposed a three-line whip which 69 Labour MPs — including *Roy Jenkins and John Smith* — defied to help the Tories to a Commons majority for Europe.

Pro-European MPs believe the same would happen next time, though sceptics in both parties are adamant that public opinion has decisively swung their way, leaving Labour's pro-European rhetoric open to Tory attack.

There was no immediate *sign of* Labour alarm as a gleeful Mr Blair declared: "There are now two Conservative parties and John Major *is not in charge of either of* them." The shadow chancellor, Gordon Brown, said the Tories had "descended into complete chaos and confusion" while Mr Ashdown called it "another example of government in free fall."

Today's Harris poll puts Labour on 49 per cent, 3 points down on last week with both Tories and Lib Dems up 1 point on 31 and 13 per cent. Polling was completed on Monday before Mr Major failed to sack a clutch of junior ministers who *defied his "wait and see" stance* on the euro.

Mr Major yesterday warned voters that the Dutch draft of revisions to the Treaty of Rome — up for decision in Amsterdam — proposed sweeping extensions of EU power over asylum, immigration and foreign policy as the "hors d'ouevre" for central control of employment, industrial and other policies. He wanted the EU to succeed but by widening its membership, not deepening its powers.

Kenneth Clarke in Bristol yesterday. He had not been warned of Mr Major's move PHOTOGRAPH: BARRY BATCHELOR

'The Conservatives have a more sensible European policy than the others'
Kenneth Clarke on a West Country visit

'A free vote is a possibility.'
John Major, at a press conference

'I have been in the West Country.'
Kenneth Clarke on why he was not consulted

'If I said I'm sorry but I'd better go and ask Ken Clarke or Joe Bloggs before I give an answer — it's not the way I operate.'
John Major, explaining the snub

Canada takes sex abuse boy Britain 'did not protect'

Owen Bowcott

A 12-YEAR-OLD British boy has been granted refugee status by Canada on the unprecedented grounds that if he returns to Britain the authorities cannot be relied on to protect him from sexual abuse by his natural father.

The ground-breaking ruling by Ottawa's Immigration and Refugee Board caught the Foreign Office by surprise. It is the first time the Canadian authorities have offered asylum to anyone having a "well-founded fear of persecution in their homeland" on the grounds of incest.

The identity of the family has not been revealed. The mother is American. The father was described by the Toronto Sun newspaper as a "British intelligence officer" who had worked for the United Nations in New York.

According to evidence presented to the board in Canada, the boy's father abused him from the age of two months. The man's parents, brothers and sisters were also said to have been involved.

The American mother — reportedly herself a victim of child abuse in her youth — claimed that her ex-husband's family were alcoholics, who took pornographic photographs of the young child being interfered with while they were drunk.

The family had threatened to have her put in an asylum if she pursued the allegations, the board's hearing was told. Documents shown to the panel allegedly revealed that the mother had approached her local social services department in London, the Police child protection team and the Local Government Ombudsman.

The Immigration and Refugee Board panel found that the mother had kept "a thorough record" of her attempts to seek help from UK authorities and that her evidence of their failure to lend assistance was "credible".

After she separated from her husband, he continued to be allowed access to the boy, who was abused repeatedly while on visits to his father until 1991, the panel heard.

The American woman remarried and went to live in Minnesota. Her new partner was deported two years later and she entered Canada where she lodged a refugee claim in November 1994.

The Foreign Office last night said the allegations would be investigated. "We will be looking into whether there is any veracity in the claim that the boy's mother sought the assistance of the UK authorities unsuccessfully," a spokesman added.

It is known that the woman approached the British consulate in Toronto in 1995 for advice. It was suggested that she should await the outcome of the asylum claim. Scotland Yard last night said that it was unaware of the case.

John Frecker, deputy chairman of the board's refugee division, said: "The panel's first concern was the child before them ... And the fact that two different states, in their own ways, failed the child." The Canadian Immigration Department is considering whether to challenge the decision, the Immigration Minister, Lucienne Robillard, said.

It is believed to be the first time that any British citizen has ever sought asylum on such grounds. An Immigration and Refugee Board spokesman, Paul Hardy, said that women had previously been granted asylum because of fears that they would be raped if they returned home.

The board's decision was not intended to brand the UK as a pariah nation with inadequate protection for child sex abuse victims. "The board is purely non-political and deals with every case on its merits."

"One of the best independent films of the year...Turturro has never been better." Derek Malcolm, The Guardian

"Turturro gives a sensitive, engaging performance...Poetic, beautifully played, a real box of delights." Sarah Bailey, Elle Magazine

JOHN TURTURRO

Some people have a hard time unwinding.

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FROM FRIDAY APRIL 25 AT SELECTED CINEMAS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Frank's knee: a case study of today's NHS

Health is now an election issue but that won't help this veteran

David Brindle, Social Services Correspondent

Frank Burke . . . arthritis in knee wounded at Arnhem

THE Patient's Charter stipulates 9 in 10 people can expect an out-patient hospital appointment within 13 weeks of referral and that nobody should wait more than 26 weeks.

So war veteran Frank Burke was yesterday stunned to have been told he must wait 2½ years to see an NHS specialist about arthritis in a knee wounded at Arnhem.

Mr Burke, aged 72, was referred by his GP to St James's University hospital in his home city of Leeds — the world-famous "Jimmy's" — which then wrote to him to say the waiting time to see the consultant was 135 weeks — giving a likely date of late 1999 and any subsequent operation some time in the next millennium. If Mr Burke had private medical insurance, his doctor says, he could be seen within a week.

"It's very hard to accept that I'll have to wait so long," said Mr Burke, a retired railway technician. "I have been suffering arthritis since 1989, caused by the war wound in my leg. Although I can walk, after about five minutes, I have to stop because of the pain from my foot to my hip."

Don Craven, his son-in-law, said: "The way he is being treated is scandalous, absolutely tragic. What angers me is that the NHS has been reduced to this by a party that is supposed to be a party of patriotism."

The Patient's Charter stipulations are a "standard", rather than a guarantee, and it carries the rider that waits can be longer "if you choose a particular consultant who is in great demand".

Adrian Smith, Mr Burke's GP, said his patient's plight could have been even worse: according to the latest waiting times circular, people could expect to wait 148 weeks to see David Macdonald, the hospital's leading knee specialist, on whose list Mr Burke has been placed.

"The lists in orthopaedics are completely unacceptable. Even if you want urgent physiotherapy, you cannot get it at all," Dr Smith said.

Dr Smith is now investigating whether his patient can be seen at another hospital.

Inside

Britain 5

World News 7

Finance 16

Sport 2

Comment and Letters 12; Obituaries 14

Sport97

Crossword 15; Weather 16

TV 16; Radio 16

16

9 770261 307354

German judges to rule whether Internet online services giant CompuServe is responsible for porn and racist material placed by its clients

Cyberspace faces crucial court test

Ian Traynor in Bonn, Alex Duval Smith in Washington and John Palmer in Brussels

AN HISTORIC test case in a German court is to weigh the ethical and commercial question of who controls information on the Internet, with the American online services company CompuServe being accused of trafficking in pornography and neo-Nazi propaganda.

Prosecutors in the state of Bavaria brought criminal charges against Felix Somm, the general manager of the German branch of CompuServe, after a long investigation that followed a police raid on the company's Munich offices in January last year. The charges were brought against Mr Somm because German law does not allow for criminal prosecutions of companies.

Apart from the pornography-related charges, the prosecution also accuses CompuServe of being responsible for the dissemination in cyberspace of neo-Nazi material, an offence in Germany.

The case is the first in Europe where prosecutors have sought to criminalise an online provider for the information put on the Internet by its clients. In the United States, the CompuServe parent company yesterday said it would "vigorously oppose" the "entirely groundless" charges.

It asserts that it bears no responsibility for the contents of thousands of Internet sites accessed via CompuServe, and cannot monitor and censor cyberspace.

Following last year's police raid on the Munich offices, CompuServe took the unusual step of temporarily barring access to 200 sites for some 4 million subscribers around the world.

The material being prosecuted includes paedophile sex and information exchanges, and pornography involving children. Under German law applicable to normal pornography, magazines and videos, children have a special status. It is illegal to pass soft porn to children and to disseminate any hard porn involving children.

With neo-Nazi propaganda, the situation is especially complicated, since its dissemination is not a crime in many countries, including the US. And since "cybersurfing" is a practice not restricted to national borders, the German campaign to curb and censor what is available on the Internet faces formidable problems.

The German parliament is trying to draft a bill regulating multi-media. The legislation is not expected to make online servers liable for the content of websites.

Elsewhere in Germany last year, prosecutors, police and government sought to restrict the availability of neo-Nazi propaganda by ordering Deutsche Telekom's T-Online server to block access to the website of a leading German neo-Nazi living in and operating out of Canada.

The European Commission is urging European Union governments to crack down on illegal and harmful material on the Internet, including information on paedophile and racist networks.

Under commission proposals to be debated later this month by the European Parliament, governments would be asked to adopt common EU-wide minimum standards defining criminal and harmful content. The industry would be asked to adopt a code of conduct governing Internet material, while parents and teachers would be encouraged to use filter systems to restrict children's access to undesirable material.

"This is a global issue and we aim at an international convention, or possible a global code of conduct, covering these and other issues affecting the use and abuse of the Internet," a commission spokesman said. The commission and EU governments will meet in Germany this month to discuss the possibilities of direct regulation and how to define the responsibilities of access providers and telecom carriers.

Nerds proclaim free speech while 'interactive' and video sex sites proliferate on net

THE availability of pornography has dogged cyberspace since use of the Internet became commonplace three years ago, *writes Stuart Millar*.

In Britain, a spate of sensational media stories last year focused on child pornography and, by creating the impression the net was a lawless frontier, brought demands for action.

The pressure was increased by a letter from Scotland Yard's clubs and vice unit, warning Internet service-providers that they might be breaching obscenity laws by carrying such material. In response the industry, with government backing, established a self-regulatory system now overseen by the Internet Watch Foundation.

However last week saw the publication in Britain of a glossy magazine carrying hundreds of addresses for web sites dealing with sex.

Earlier this year, the first international conference on violence and pornography met in London and was told that lack of political will at an international level had hindered attempts to clean up the net.

Free speech campaigners claim that removing any material, even that which would be illegal in another medium, is an assault on the principles of cyberspace. They also claim porn is relatively difficult to find on the net.

But in the current issue of a web magazine, net, a journalist claims he found illegal material in a little over three minutes by entering the term "sex" into a search engine. Once found, these sites usually provide links to dozens more.

According to experts, pornographers have turned to the web for two reasons: with technological improvements it now offers video footage and 'live' interactive sites as well as photographs; and distribution is instant and effortless, needing to take no regard of distance or national laws.

'Delighted' friend Jackie Cox

Drugs woman in Thai jail to move back to Britain

Sandra Gregory, sentenced to 25 years jail in Thailand for attempting to smuggle heroin PHOTOGRAPH: ROSS PARRY

Co-accused Robert Lock

Erlend Clouston

A SCOTSWOMAN sentenced in 1996 to 25 years in a Thai jail for attempting to smuggle heroin is to be allowed to complete her imprisonment in Britain.

Sandra Gregory's transfer, initially probably to Holloway prison, north London, followed a routine appeal to the Thai authorities. Their decision was welcomed by friends of the 31-year-old teacher, but received a more muted response from her parents and the mother of her former co-accused.

Lynda Lock, whose son Robert was named by Gregory as the instigator of the smuggling plot, said she still resented the teacher's claim. "I don't think anyone who is human would be overjoyed, do you? How would you answer that if it was your son?" she said.

Mr Lock, from Cambridge, was acquitted in 1996 after spending over three years in Thai custody.

Gregory, who has spent four years and two months in Bangkok's notorious Klong Prem jail, is expected to return to Britain within two months. Under Thai law, convicted foreigners become eligible for repatriation after they have served four years in detention. Ms Gregory was arrested at Bangkok airport in February 1993 after officials found 102 grams of heroin in her luggage.

After assessment at Holloway, Ms Gregory, whose parents live at Pitcaple, in Aberdeenshire, will almost certainly be allowed to move to a jail further north. Likely locations include Askham Grange open prison at York, or New Hall, near Wakefield.

Stan and Doreen Gregory are believed to have made at least one private visit to their daughter in the Far East since her arrest.

Mr Gregory, the former managing director of an engineering plant, refused to comment on his daughter's transfer yesterday, but local minister, the Rev Jim Jack, said the family were very relieved at the news.

"We thought it was likely to happen but we didn't know until we heard it on the radio that this was actually taking place," he said.

Gregory has been helped over her ordeal by a support group based in Sowerby Bridge, the West Yorkshire town where she last worked in a school. A spokeswoman, Jackie Cox, said all her friends were delighted at the announcement.

"Sandra has been in quite good spirits but getting the transfer has been a long process," she said. "She applied for it last May, and has been waiting for the slow wheels of bureaucracy to turn."

Gregory was originally sentenced to death but this was commuted to 25 years in prison because of her confession. At her trial she alleged that Lock had paid her to smuggle the heroin aboard a flight to Japan.

It is unclear how much of her sentence Ms Gregory will have to serve. A spokesman for the Prison Service last night said it was not practice to discuss the details of an individual's sentence. The Thai authorities will have no role to play in deciding when she will be released.

"No plea bargaining has taken place," a Foreign Office spokesman said. "Once she arrives she will be treated exactly like any other prisoner. Her rights to parole will be decided in terms of UK prison regulations." Thai prisoners, like their UK equivalents, are granted automatic remission for good behaviour.

The Foreign Office confirmed it had backed Gregory's application, but stressed she had not received special treatment.

"We established a bilateral prisoner exchange scheme in 1991; if a prisoner asks us for support we would offer formal assistance," he said.

Yeltsin-Kohl spa summit fails to calm Nato waters

Ian Traynor in Bonn

RUSSIA'S president, Boris Yeltsin, yesterday pledged to sign a new security charter with the Nato alliance in Paris next month.

But crucial talks between Mr Yeltsin and Germany's chancellor, Helmut Kohl, in the southern German spa resort of Baden-Baden failed to bridge the East-West differences that need to be settled before the charter can be finalised, paving the way for Nato's expansion into eastern Europe.

The Paris meeting is to seal a new strategic and security partnership between Russia and the West in advance of a Nato summit in July in Madrid which is formally to invite Poland, Hungary and the Czech republic to join the alliance.

Following more than four hours of talks, the two leaders put on a show of camaraderie and chumminess. But Mr Kohl did not manage to calm Russian fears.

Mr Yeltsin said the chancellor backed Moscow's position on Nato expansion — that the alliance and Russia would engage in "binding consultations", and that "decisions" would be taken "on the basis of consensus between all the states, including Russia".

Mr Kohl did not confirm that he had offered such backing. Were Mr Yeltsin's claim true, it would be tantamount to Mr Kohl conceding a Russian veto on key Nato decision-taking. German officials denied that this was the case.

"The mood, the springtime, the sunshine reflect the nature of the German-Russian relationship," Mr Kohl stated afterwards. But if there was no breakthrough on the thorny issue of Nato's expansion, nor was there any obvious progress on the other main issue tackled by the summit — the fate of the "war trophy art" looted by the Soviet army in Germany at the end of the war, which Moscow is loath to return.

While Mr Yeltsin said definitively that the Paris summit would be held on May 27, Mr Kohl said only he was "confident" it would take place. The chancellor said 90 per cent of the work on the Paris charter was complete, but "considerable differences of opinion" remained.

Officials in Mr Yeltsin's entourage have made it plain during the three-day trip that Moscow remains fiercely opposed to Nato expansion, and have stressed there can be no possibility of the Baltic states eventually joining.

The Russians complained of being cut out of the arms markets of eastern Europe by western predators wielding Nato membership promises, and alleged that Moscow had been "deceived" by the West. "The trust is gone," said Mr Yeltsin's foreign policy aide, Sergei Karaganov.

Russia is insisting on binding Nato commitments not to deploy nuclear weapons or foreign troops on the territory of the proposed three new members, and not to use or upgrade existing military facilities there.

Nato has already said it has no intention of deploying nuclear weapons or foreign troops in new member countries. "That does not mean that we are renouncing a future military presence there completely," said General Klaus Naumann, the German chairman of Nato's military committee, in an interview yesterday.

Air defences and military infrastructure in the new member countries had to be modernised, he added. "The new members need not worry about becoming second-class Nato members."

Yeltsin's gifts, page 6

New heart valve to keep Terminator up and running

Alex Duval Smith in Washington

AFTER the president on crutches comes the Terminator on the operating table.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, aged 49, was reportedly feeling fine and promising "I'll be back" after undergoing heart surgery on Wednesday at an unidentified Los Angeles hospital.

"I knew I'd have to take care of this condition sooner or later," he said. "I said to the doctors 'Let's do it now, while I'm young and healthy'. They agreed this was the way to go."

Schwarzenegger, whose bulging biceps have given him one of the most lucrative careers in Hollywood, had his aortic valve replaced because of a congenital defect, said his publicist, Catherine Olim.

She denied that the operation was linked to the steroids Schwarzenegger has admitted taking when, as a young Austrian bodybuilder, he won 13 titles, including Mr Universe and Mr World. The condition existed in his family, she said.

"We expect a very short recovery period."

Married to the television journalist Maria Shriver, a niece of John F Kennedy, Schwarzenegger is a staunch Republican, appointed chairman of the president's Council of Physical Fitness and Sports by George Bush. He also does a lot of fitness work with mentally handicapped children.

He smokes cigars. American gossip magazines often retail stories about Ms Shriver telling the Terminator to go outside to smoke.

Sixty years on, fighting a threadbare cause

Review

Robert Dawson Scott

A Greater Tomorrow
Dundee Rep/touring

DOES anyone still care about the Spanish Civil War, apart from Ken Loach? Not many in Dundee, it would appear, where a disappointingly thin house turned out for Hector MacMillan's new play which has Jock Cunningham, a real-life hero of the war and a battalion commander in the bloody battle of Jarama, at its centre.

A pity, for MacMillan has produced a very decent play with a fine central performance which in many ways is not about Spain in the late 1930s at all, but about now.

Nobody knows what became of the real Jock Cunningham; after he was recalled from Spain by the Communist Party of Great Britain, he disappeared from view, becoming something of a drifter. He would be in his late 80s now, but most of the old International Brigaders assume he's long dead. MacMillan sets his play in the present with a fictionalised Jock living in reduced circumstances in an abandoned railway truck in the Scottish countryside.

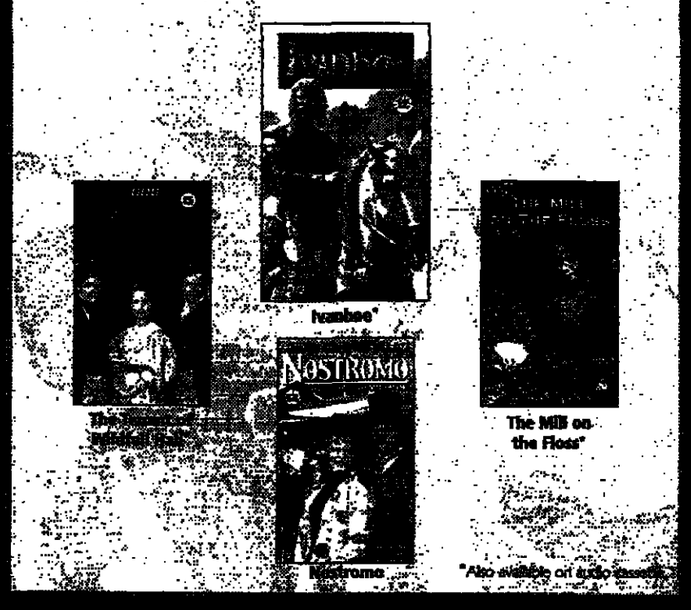
Various people — a wordly nun, a bulldozer driver who has to shift the old truck out of the way for a new pipeline, and eventually a young policewoman — try to persuade this rather peculiar old tramp to be taken into care. Needless to say, he doesn't want to go and they are all surprised to find he's not such an old tramp after all.

Naturally, this involves learning Jock's life story. Cue flashbacks to Spain, created with a minimum of fuss in Hamish Glen's sympathetic production, using skilfully edited film sequences projected all over the set.

It's all rather low key; a cast of nine, including two musicians, grey tones everywhere, and Derek Anders, as Jock, immobilised for most of the time in a wheelchair. And yet it's oddly moving. The emotional heart of the play, it seems to me, comes not in the set-piece company songs or the imagined final confrontation with Harry Pollitt of the CP in 1938, but in the quiet chat between Cunningham and the policewoman today. Her grandfather tried to go to Spain but failed. He made her read Orwell and generally passed on his convictions, so that at least she knows what Jock is talking about.

I found myself thinking about all those obscure acts of heroism from obscure guys who went off to that obscure war for no other reason than to fight for an ideal of extraordinary nobility, and who, if they were lucky enough to survive, then slipped back into obscurity to become parents and grandparents. Unexpectedly, I had a big lump in my throat. And that's not a bad way to come out of the theatre.

Relive The Drama
Stunning new BBC productions now available on video



Available from all good retailers
BBC

New leaves

Aegopodium podagraria variegatum (right): ornamental pointy leaves, looks a little like ground elder after spraying with ineffective weedkiller.
Gardening Which? says: Aaagh! Do you really want to pay to introduce ground elder into your garden?
Garden centre says: An attractive well-mannered plant which just needs an occasional firm hand.

Milium effusum aureum (above): golden-leaved Bowles grass, striking in a shady place
Gardening Which? says: Watch out, especially in moist shady conditions: it'll be out and about before you know what's happened.
Garden centre says: OK, it spreads, but it's very ornamental and you only have to dig bits up to stay in charge. The same thing happens with day lilies, and who objects to them?

Meconopsis cambrica: pretty yellow poppy, germinates in the smallest niche.
Gardening Which? says: It'll self-seed everywhere and it's a devil to weed out
Garden centre says: It's a very pretty plant — who minds if it pops up all over the place?

Gardeners face 'Triffid' invasion

Martin Wainwright reports on the menace of weeds from hell

THE craze for novelty among Britain's gardeners has spawned a new menace, according to consumer watchdogs — the weeds from hell disguised as ornamental shrubs.

Garden centres and nurseries are accused today of marketing close cousins of some of the gardener's deadliest enemies.

Alistair Ayres, editor of Gardening Which?, said: "Some of the most pernicious weeds in the book are now on sale in fancy disguise. We are talking about successors to Japanese knotweed [now an officially controlled pest]. If you plant half an inch of root and you can have a border of the stuff a mile long within a couple of years."

The claims, involving almost a dozen species, are strongly disputed by garden centres and nurseries, but there is some common ground over the potential of the plants. Camilla Fage, a Cheshire nurserywoman who deals in one of the plants — a "tame" variegated version of the much feared ground elder, said: "There is a difference between gardeners who know about dividing and controlling vigorous plants, and other who put them in and then wonder 'God, why ever did I plant that'."

The variegated elder, *Aegopodium podagraria variegatum* is singled out by Mr Ayres as the leading menace-in-disguise, followed by *Persicaria virginiana* (a knot weed cousin) and the variegated clover. Equipped with pallid underground runners, which start escaping even from £4.50 garden centre pots, the elder "quickly spreads through your borders and worse still, sets seed which can grow into plain ground elder.

"No right-minded person would go down to the garden centre to buy a pot of ground elder, but plenty of people will happily part with money for its variegated offspring.

"Some of these ornamental weeds can be fine in the right, discouraging conditions, but with most of them, the message just has to be no."

The garden centre industry is now worth an estimated £3 billion, and is forecast to grow by 6 per cent this year. Each year's new plants appear swiftly and uniformly in gardens from Cornwall to Cape Wrath.

The problem is the latest in a series of horticultural surprises for amateur gardeners, including the national love affair with fast-growing Leyland cypress hedges which, without strenuous pruning, rapidly develop into full-sized trees.

Ever more inventive bird seed has also landed some gardens with an interesting range of new plants, including Cannabis Sativa. "They say that is why one of the bird foods is called Swoop," said Mr Ayres.

Other plants fingered by Gardening Which? include the fragile but feisty Welsh poppy *Meconopsis cambrica*, blown apart by winds buf a feckless seeder.

"Fancy coloured leaves are also used as a disguise by the woodland weed Bowles Golden Grass [*Milium Effusum Aureum*]," said Mr Ayres. "Plant one in shady conditions and it will seed everywhere."

The Triffid theory was discounted by Ms Fage, whose stock also includes Welsh poppies at £1.50 a pot and Bowles grass at £4.99.

"The variegated elder certainly has attractive leaves, but I've never known it set seed of its horrible relation. Yes, it spreads and we sell it as good ground cover, but it's nothing like as energetic and invasive as ground elder. We'd never sell it if it was.

"It is really a matter of knowing about dividing plants at the right time and setting limits on them. Most garderers are aware that anything a friend gives them is likely to be invasive because those are the ones people split up. It's a question of managing them properly."

Besieged Israeli PM fires back at critics

Shyam Bhatia in Jerusalem

ISRAEL'S beleaguered prime minister went on the offensive last night, rejecting demands that he step down and attacking the police who have recommended indicting him on charges of fraud and breach of trust in an influence-peddling scandal.

Speaking before supporters of his ruling Likud party, Binyamin Netanyahu said he was receiving messages of support from all over the country.

"The truth will triumph," he declared. "We are not going anywhere, we are staying in the place where the people and history put us. We will continue to lead this people."

With their futures hanging in the balance, Mr Netanyahu and his political allies have decided to go on the attack, questioning the credibility of the police investigation. Sources close to the prime minister even hinted last night that the head of the police inquiry, Sando Mazor, was himself involved in "wrongdoing" and his day of judgment was still to come.

The cabinet secretary, Danny Naveh, told Israeli reporters last night: "This is an attempt to change the will of the electorate by illegitimate means. The police case is based on flimsy evidence, flimsy witnesses and flimsy allegations."

Prosecutors were meeting at a secluded location near Jerusalem yesterday to decide whether to charge the prime minister, as the police recommend. A decision is expected within the next 48 hours.

The scandal concerns the appointment in January of a little-known lawyer, Roni Bar-On, as Israel's attorney-general. He resigned almost instantly amid an outcry that he was unqualified for the job, and it was later alleged that he had been appointed to allow a plea bargain by a party leader in Mr Netanyahu's coalition who was facing trial for corruption.

Despite his bravado, Mr Netanyahu is said to be shaken by the police recommendation.

President Ezer Weizman, commenting on the developing scandal, told Israel Radio: "Mr Netanyahu is in trouble. I don't wish for anyone to pass through what he is passing."

At least 14 members of parliament from the ruling coalition yesterday called on the prime minister to suspend himself. One of them, Shaul Yahalom, the head of the parliament's constitution committee, suggested that he take a holiday before standing trial.

Leaders of the Labour Party held an urgent meeting to assess the outcome of the police inquiry, which has created what their leader, Shimon Peres, calls a "political earthquake" in Israel. Mr Peres said: "Mr Netanyahu must draw the appropriate conclusions. There is no other way out, the country is in crisis and so is the peace process."

The former foreign minister, Ehud Barak, who is running for the Labour leadership, said: "People should ask themselves now, 'Is this the country we were dreaming of?' Mr Netanyahu is unsuitable and he must go. This government has reached the end of the road."

> 'We are staying in the place where the people and history put us'

The new political crisis has overshadowed efforts by the United States to revive the stalled Middle East peace negotiations. The US special envoy, Dennis Ross, who yesterday held meetings with the prime minister, the foreign minister and the defence minister, is pondering whether to stay on in Israel until Mr Netanyahu's future is resolved.

The Palestinians have also concluded they have no choice but to wait until the government's future is clarified. Many Palestinians said yesterday they hoped the scandal would topple Mr Netanyahu, whom they blame for the deadlock in the peace talks. Asked for his reactions last night, the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, said the developments in Israel were an internal affair.

End near for 'Bibi', page 7; Leader comment, page 12

Theory of space is challenged

Claim about light speed upsets basic assumption of physics

Tim Radford
Science Editor

TWO US scientists claim that space is not the same in all directions. They believe that how light travels is affected by its direction of travel across the universe. This challenges the most basic assumptions of physics.

Physics works on the assumption that there is no "up" or "down" and that space is the same everywhere in the universe. The new finding casts doubt on this. It also seems to suggest that light might have more than one speed — which would upset the assumptions of Einstein's theory of special relativity.

The finding is published in next week's Physical Review Letters. The pair who might be about to upset the cosmic applecart are the Norwegian-born Borge Nodland, of the University of Rochester, New York, and John Ralston of the University of Kansas. They have been studying radio waves from 160 distant galaxies and measuring the orientation of light as it travels from the farthest reaches of the universe.

The effect they observe is tiny — so tiny that it can only be detected in light that has been travelling across the 15 billion or so light years of space, and therefore the whole 15 billion years of time so far.

They called it the "corkscrew effect" because of the way it twisted light as it travelled across the heavens.

They found that the plane of polarisation of light — something that happens as light passes though sunglasses or the magnetic fields between galaxies — is rotated about once in a billion years. From Earth, the axis of orientation runs through the constellation Sextans and towards the constellation Aquila.

"The big news is that perhaps not all space is equal, for as far back as we can peer in time," Nodland said yesterday. Ralston added: "The shocking thing about our result is that there seems to be an absolute axis, a kind of cosmological north star that orients the universe. We don't really know yet what this axis represents."

But the finding was greeted with caution by astronomers last night. Other observers will have to confirm the results before they can be widely accepted, but if true, they create problems for anyone trying to understand the universe. Nial Tanvir, of the Institute of Astronomy at Cambridge, was one of the team which yesterday identified gamma radiation from a colossal cosmic traffic accident at the edge of the universe.

"If true, it upsets what we call cosmological principle, which has been adopted as a working hypothesis for the last 60 or 70 years. It just says the universe on a large scale is more or less the same everywhere and looks the same everywhere. It would have philosophical consequences," he said. "It would certainly shake the view we have of the universe. But it sounds as if it was a fairly small number of galaxies they looked at. When you are working with small statistical samples it is always possible to find an odd result."

But until now, nobody had suggested that light travelled one way through space more easily than another. It could mean that creation was not symmetric. "Perhaps it was not a perfect Big Bang, but a Big Bang with a twist to space and time," said Nodland yesterday. He stressed that other scientists would need to confirm his results.

"We're on a little planet going around some burning mass that we call a sun, in a certain region of space," he said. "What is this space, and why are we here? The universe is amazing and I want to know the most about it."

Did you see it? Did you? Everybody's talking about it. Peter tells me that Jack told him that Alistair told him that Cherie told him that Tony really liked it too. It's our New Labour bulldog I'm talking about, of course.
Bel Littlejohn

This section, page 13

Mayday! Mayday! It's too late.

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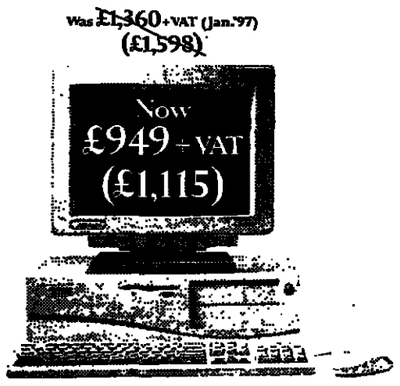

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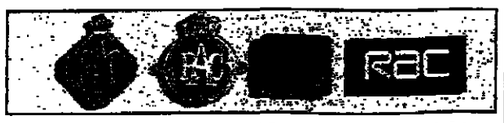


Twenty years of RAC logos, with the latest on the right

RAC sheds crown 'for business reasons'

Keith Harper
Transport Editor

WITH the approval of its patron, the Queen, the Royal Automobile Club yesterday announced it has removed the crown from its logo because it is "no longer appropriate to promote a business".

The RAC's chief executive, Neil Johnson, said the replacement logo had been seen by the Queen and Buckingham Palace was "absolutely delighted with it".

He denied that the change was anti-royalist. "The RAC logo has evolved to reflect a classic, dynamic and futuristic motoring organisation. For sound business reasons we have simplified the logo, but we remain proud of our royal roots at the RAC, and Prince Michael of Kent is our president," he enthused.

The palace said later that the design was a matter for the RAC. It confirmed that the Queen had been consulted and had no objections.

Although the change is the RAC's fourth logo facelift in 20 years, it is the first without the crown which appeared above the letters RAC on every patrol vehicle and patrolman's badge.

Mr Johnson also denied that the RAC had joined a growing list of organisations that regard their association with anything royal as a disincentive. The most recent example was the holiday airline Britannia Airways, which dropped its "royal" service on flights because it says the word no longer had the right connotation.

Mr Johnson said: "The reason is purely one of design. It would have been difficult to have got the crown on to the newly designed van."

And for any who thought the RAC had little faith in the future of the monarchy, he added: "I'm absolutely certain that both the monarchy and the RAC are set to carry on into the 21st century."

However, Harold Brooks-Baker, publishing director of Burke's Peerage, said the decision was "simply one more indication that the magic has gone out of anything royal".

He added: "In the past, if something was called royal it gained a lot of support and admiration — but that has all gone now. This shows a lack of interest in the fairytale aspect of the monarchy — it means the mystique has disappeared forever. For many people, the word 'royal' has a controversial meaning, and no business wants a controversial meaning."

Yesterday's promotion was primarily aimed at improving the RAC's membership, which stands at 5.8 million, compared with the AA's 9 million. A direct pitch was made to cyclists and those who use the bicycle as an alternative or supplement to the car. Mr Johnson said: "Our members are not just motorists. They cycle, walk and use public transport ... and we have to address their mobility needs."

A policy is offered for cyclists to cover claims for personal injury and uninsured losses such as damage to bicycle or clothes due to accidents. It costs £6 a year for an RAC member or £10 for a non-motoring member.

Mr Johnson produced the RAC's own bike, designed by Alex Moulton, which can be stowed in the back of a car to give motorists the option of parking and riding.

However, as it costs £647 Mr Johnson admitted a cheaper model would have to be developed.

Anna White, a member of the teaching team sent to the Ridings after an Ofsted inspection, outside the school where she has just been appointed head teacher PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE FORREST

Key member of management team becomes new head at Ridings school

Martin Wainwright

A KEY member of the teaching team which has turned round the troubled Ridings school in Halifax, has been appointed permanent head.

Anna White, 42 year-old second-in-command of the school's management team since the emergency takeover last autumn, will take charge in September.

Highly experienced in "sharp end" teaching, in Bury and Blackburn, she has played a leading role in restoring morale at the Ridings — dubbed "the worst school in Britain" after discipline all but collapsed under its previous regime.

"She has done a tremendous job at the Ridings in the last six months and has gained invaluable experience to enable her to lead the school forward positively," said Ian Jennings, director of education in Calderdale, West Yorkshire.

Ms White will take over when Peter Clark, seconded as head after an emergency Ofsted inspection in November, returns to his school.

Ms White, an English and politics graduate of Manchester polytechnic with a teaching degree from Manchester university, has worked as a chief exam moderator in English literature.

Ridings pupils have made their name since last autumn's débâcle in a number of fields, including a photographic exhibition and a much praised drama entry for a national anti-drugs campaign. Calderdale also announced yesterday that its action plan on improved central services to local schools will be submitted to Education and Employment Secretary, Gillian Shephard, today well ahead of schedule.

Microsoft e-mail shutdown

MICROSOFT yesterday closed down e-mail services on its MSN network after just 24 hours' notice, leaving its 2.5 million members around the world without access to their electronic mail, *writes Nicholas Bannister*.

MSN, the world's third largest online service, said it had closed down the service launched in August 1995 for up to 36 hours to upgrade the system with extra computers and software.

Its UK marketing director, Taylor Collyer, said the upgrade was scheduled for three weeks' time but was brought forward because the e-mail service ran into capacity problems on its US computers earlier than expected.

He added that all e-mails received during the shutdown would be saved and could be read as soon as the service was restored — by 5pm today at the latest.

The upgrade will double MSN's e-mail capacity and enable it to carry out further service improvements without having to shut down.

Snake collector banned

A MAN who kept more than 60 deadly and dangerous snakes in his unlocked garage was banned from keeping dangerous animals for 10 years and fined £350 yesterday.

Ian Ramsden, aged 34, from Sutton, south-west London, admitted 53 counts of keeping dangerous animals without a licence and was convicted of two charges of causing unnecessary suffering to an animal.

RSPCA officers and police found the collection of snakes in the unlocked garage next to Ramsden's semi-detached home, Sutton magistrates court heard.

Magistrate Mary Graham told him: "You showed a blatant disregard for the safety of others. Potentially lethal and dangerous snakes were left in an unlocked garage in a residential area."

Ramsden was banned from keeping dangerous animals under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act of 1976 for the offence of not holding a licence and fined £150.

He was fined £100 for each of the two offences of causing unnecessary suffering to animals and was ordered to pay £150 costs.

Mark Love, prosecuting, said: "RSPCA inspectors found a gallery of snakes which should be avoided, among them the Colletts tiger snake and saw scale viper. I understand that for these two types of snake no anti-venom is available."

A document entitled Ian's Price List had been found at the house, stating the prices of a list of snakes, many of which were held by Ramsden, the court heard.

Also found were documents with the business name of Direct Reptiles and a telephone number which led police back to a mobile phone in Ramsden's house.

Mr Love said Ramsden denied being involved in the illegal trade of buying and selling snakes.

Outside court Ramsden, an unemployed father-of-two, denied there was any danger to the public in keeping venomous snakes in his garage. He said: "I'm very upset with the ban. I kept all my animals in good condition. I was in no way cruel to the animals."

But PC John Shurvel, of the wild animal section of the Metropolitan police, said Ramsden's collection was a danger to his neighbours and his family.

"There were a number of highly venomous snakes kept in a residential area in an insecure garage. Any escaping, which I believe they could have done, could have caused injury."

Muggers knife TV chief

Kate Watson-Smyth

DETECTIVES are re-examining a series of attacks on wealthy people after the millionaire businessman Michael Green and his wife became the latest victims of robbery in the garage of their home in Mayfair, London.

In the past 12 months there have been several similar attacks on the wealthy, including Bernie Ecclestone, the motor racing chief, the wife of the publisher Lord Weidenfeld and the wife of the financier Christopher Moran.

But Detective Superintendent Brian Edwards, of the Metropolitan police, said he did not believe the attacks were linked, though there were similarities. "While there are some similarities between this and a number of other offences, it is a long way from saying they are linked," he said. "We are ... re-examining these offences."

Detective Inspector Steve Haggar described the attack on the Greens as "nasty and violent. They did try to co-operate but it was a very distressing incident for both of them," he said.

Mr Green, aged 49, and his wife Tessa, 45, were ambushed by three men as they arrived at their £5 million home on Tuesday night.

He was attacked as he climbed out of his Rolls-Royce in his garage.

Two men jumped on him, holding knives to his throat as the third snatched a necklace worth about £1,000 from his wife.

Mr Green, a father of five and head of Carlton Television, was then slashed across the face. He collapsed on the garage floor as the gang made off with the gold necklace and a bag containing £500.

The couple were taken to St Mary's hospital, Paddington, where Mrs Green was treated for shock and her husband received stitches for the wounds to his face. He was later allowed home.

A spokesman for Carlton said he had returned to work yesterday.

"He has some small cuts but nothing major. He was shocked but is glad his wife was unhurt. He is putting it all behind him and is now well enough to get on with his work."

Mr Haggar said police believed the robbers had been filmed on a security video which clearly showed the Greens' car arriving home at about 10.15pm.

Moments later, a dark blue BMW 5 is seen coming into view. Police said they believed this was the suspects' car. Then three black men in their 20s are seen heading towards the couple.

Mail order cigarettes firm 'gutted' by legal opinion

EU moves to close tobacco loophole

Stephen Bates in Brussels

A BRITISH firm's attempt to offer customers cheap mail order cigarettes by importing them from European Union countries with lower excise duties was on the verge of foundering last night as the European Court of Justice was advised that the practice infringed EU regulations.

The advocate general's opinion at the court in Luxembourg appears likely to cut off a potentially lucrative trade organised by the Enlightened Tobacco Company in Luxemburg, where cigarette duty is about 40 per cent lower than in Britain.

Although a final ruling by the court is not expected for several months, the judges are likely to follow the legal opinion of Ruiz-Jarabo Colomer, saving Britain's Customs and Excise alone an estimated £2 billion a year in lost duties.

Ten of the 15 member states backed the British authorities' case (brought before the court to secure a definitive ruling) because of the potentially crippling loss of revenue governments would experience if ETC's scheme was allowed. Among those backing Britain's case were Germany, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and Sweden plus the European Commission and Imperial Tobacco.

Mark Thomson, a spokesman for Customs and Excise, said: "To have ruled otherwise would have been a major blow to all the retail trade, particularly people like newsagents ... because obviously other competitors would have been able to avoid paying excise duty.

"If the decision had gone against us, it's difficult to estimate the loss, but we would expect it to be about a quarter of the market — about £2 billion a year."

Since 1995, ETC has offered customers cheap cigarettes, marketed under the label Death and imported from a shop run by a subsidiary company in Luxembourg. Customers paid that country's excise duties.

> 'So much for the common market. This is a sad day for Europe. The man on the street has been crushed again'

Orders of up to 800 cigarettes could be placed "without leaving the comfort of the armchair" with an agency called Man in Black — another ETC subsidiary — which arranged delivery but charged a fee.

An early consignment was confiscated by the authorities at Dover, and the High Court in London outlawed the practice but referred the case to the European Court. The firm claims it was following EU single market principles, which prevent barriers to trade.

ETC chairman B J Cunningham, who declared himself "gutted" by yesterday's announcement, added: "So much for the common market. This is a sad day for Europe. It seems the advocate-general does not believe in the first principle of the European Union — 'the freedom of movement of goods and people'.

"The man on the street has been crushed again. All Europe offers is straight bananas and Euro-babble."

The advocate-general held that excise exemptions could only be claimed if purchasers travelled in person to buy goods and carry them home. His opinion stated that under directive 92/12/EEC on the movement of goods subject to excise duties, duties are as a general rule charged in the member state where products are acquired, but only where private individuals are making purchases on their own behalf.

"The literal wording ... referred to transport operations carried out by the private individual and no one else," Mr Colomer's opinion said.

As the firm considered its reaction last night, the legal opinion appeared likely to undermine a growing cross-border tobacco trade. That includes a burgeoning informal market in hand-rolling tobacco from Belgian border towns near Calais, which is now estimated to supply nearly two-thirds of the British market.

Niro, a Neopolitan mastiff and Basil, a King Charles spaniel, wait patiently to taste the delicacies PHOTOGRAPH: GARRY WEASER

Dogs to bite into slice of high life

A BIZARRE slice of Americana arrives in Britain today with the opening of the country's first dog bakery, *writes Vivek Chaudhary*.

Based in Raynes Park, south London, the Three Dog Bakery is set to lure dog lovers with an assortment of lavish foods such as birthday and wedding cakes (costing around £12 each and personalised), pizzas, ribs and biscuits: a roast beef biscuit is under consideration.

The idea for the up-market canine consumables comes from the United States where the company already operates seven outlets with another 20 to open by the end of the year.

The company was founded by Dan Dye and Mark Beckloff, who decided to produce the food using natural products and an assortment of exotic flavours after their pets turned their snouts up at the regular food on offer.

To cater for the British market, Three Dog Bakery has invented two new products; a biscuit in the shape of a postman's leg with a special lamb-and-mint flavouring and an edible newspaper.

Evan Wooton, general manager of Three Dog Bakery in America and self-confessed dog nut, said: "I don't think we are going over the top or being silly about our dogs. We know that the English have an even stronger affection for their dogs than us Americans (which is hard to imagine). We believe that there's nothing better than pampering man's best friend."

Neanderthal man

Australopithecus

Scientists find fragments dating from 20 million years ago of the earliest known ancestor of man and ape

Humans probably share a grandparent with gorillas, Tim Radford reports

How earlier anthropologists once imagined our ancestors might have looked. Later discoveries have traced them back to more than 20 million years

SCIENTISTS have found fragments of man's oldest known ancestor. They say today that bits of tooth, face and backbone unearthed in Uganda over several decades are evidence of a stiff-backed creature — forerunner of both apes and humans — which lived 20 million years ago.

Details of the newly-named Morotopithecus bishopi have just been published in the US journal Science. The story began more than 30 years ago when a scientist called Bishop found pieces of human-looking material in muddy sediments later covered by lava in the Moroto region of Uganda.

The teeth and the facial bones belonged to an ape-like creature, but the backbone belonged to an animal with a broad chest and the ability to sit or swing or even stand upright.

The bones did not make sense, but in 1994/95 Laura MacLatchy of New York State university and colleagues from other universities went back to East Africa and found more fossils. In the meantime techniques for dating had improved.

In the past few decades, and using a variety of evidence, experts have established that Homo sapiens began in Africa about 250,000 years ago — and for a while shared the planet with at least two other distinct human species living in groups — Neanderthal man and Homo erectus.

But there were manlike creatures — Australopithecus and Homo habilis — on foot in Africa long before that. About 8 million years ago, one of these was a common ancestor of all humans and man's nearest surviving relative, the chimpanzee. But that ancestor, too, had ancestors: one of which must have linked chimpanzees and gorillas.

Experts have counted up to 30 species of ape-like creatures in the distant past.

The fragments at Moroto turned out to be 20.6 million years old. All the evidence points to only one large hominid in the area at the time. The discovery pushes the evidence of ape-human evolution back at least 5 million years. The scientists say "Morotopithecus represents the earliest evidence for an apelike body plan in the primate fossil record."

Peter Andrews of the Natural History Museum said Moroto 20 million years ago was probably forested: the backbone suggested a creature on the way to sitting upright, or walking like a modern ape, using knuckles. "It lived in trees. It was probably a bit like the orang-utan today. It was big. More than that is difficult to say."

Man charged with IRA sniper killings of soldiers

David Sharrock
Ireland Correspondent

AN Irishman was charged yesterday with committing three IRA murders in 19 years, the last two months ago when Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick was killed by a sniper at a checkpoint in south Armagh.

Martin McGinn, aged 39, from Castleblaney, Co Monaghan, in the Irish Republic, was one of three men in a Northern Ireland court facing terrorist charges including murder, attempted murder, possession of weapons and IRA membership.

McGinn was charged with murdering Lance Bombadier Restorick, aged 23, who was shot dead while manning the vehicle checkpoint in Bessbrook on February 12, and Lance Bombardier Andrew Garrett, who died in a similar attack on December 2, 1993, in Keady, south Armagh.

He was also charged with murdering a former Ulster Defence Regiment soldier, Gilbert Johnston, who was shot dead outside a sweet shop in Keady in August 19, 1978.

Mr Johnston was murdered four years after leaving the UDR.

Micheal Caraher, aged 30, of Cullyhanna, south Armagh, was charged with the attempted murder of RUC constable Ronald Galway, who was in the leg in an attack in Forkhill, Co Armagh, on March 29 this year.

Together with Martin Mines, aged 28, of Crossmaglen, the men were also charged with conspiracy to murder, membership of the Provisional IRA, and having possession of a .50 Barrett bolt-action rifle, an AKMassault rifle and ammunition.

The men, who appeared separately at a special sitting of Banbridge magistrates, Co Down, surrounded by armed police, were all remanded in custody until May 7.

They were detained on Thursday last week at the start of a big operation by security forces in south Armagh, during which a Barrett and an AKM rifle were recovered.

Three other men detained at the same time have been released without charge.

A seventh man was flown to London yesterday at the request of the Metropolitan police, who are believed to want to question him about terrorism in the capital but refused to discuss their interest in him.

McGinn was handcuffed with his hands behind his back until the magistrate ordered that his arms be freed. His face looked bruised, and his solicitor listed injuries which he alleged had been inflicted by soldiers when he was arrested.

The solicitor said both eyes, the nose, the right ear, which required stitches, the head, which needed staples, the right shoulder, the right arm and the lower back and knees were affected.

A detective inspector said that when McGinn was apprehended there was a struggle, but he could not comment on whether he had any injuries before then. The inspector said McGinn had been medically examined on his arrival in police custody and taken to hospital in Craigavon for treatment.

The inspector also confirmed that Caraher was taken to hospital for treatment for hand, chest and head injuries, which he alleged were caused at the time of his arrest by police and soldiers. The court was told that Caraher had made four separate complaints arising out of his arrest and alleged maltreatment by police between April 10 and his appearance in court.

Caraher was shot and seriously injured by Royal Marines in south Armagh in December 1990 when soldiers opened fire on a car, killing Caraher's younger brother, Fergal.

A solicitor acting for Martin Mines said his client had also complained that he had been physically assaulted and had sustained injuries to his head and back during his detention.

All three men denied the charges against them.

Stephen Restorick ... shot at checkpoint in February

ITN wins apology over Bosnia libel

Andrew Culf
Media Correspondent

ITN yesterday won an apology in the libel courts for allegations that its news coverage of Bosnian Serb detention camps had been fabricated.

Two-Ten Communications, a press release distribution company, apologised in the High Court to ITN and its reporters Penny Marshall and Ian Williams for the "very real distress and damage" and paid their legal costs.

The company, owned by the Press Association, had transmitted the libellous release in January on its wire service on behalf of Living Marxism magazine, previewing an article by a German journalist Thomas Deichmann.

It referred to an image taken from the ITN reports in 1992 of an emaciated Muslim, Fikret Alic, behind barbed wire at Trnopolje, which was reproduced by news organisations around the world.

Living Marxism alleged that there was no barbed wire and that the image was created by camera angles and editing and had "fooled the world".

The reports won awards from the Royal Television Society and British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

Solicitor Katherine Rimell told Mr Justice Morland the press release had in effect accused ITN of "perpetrating a gross deception on the public by deliberately and dishonestly fabricating the news and then concealing what they had done".

She said the reports were accurate and impartial, and it was clear from the final report of a United Nations commission that Trnopolje was a concentration camp.

Most of the men behind the wire had recently arrived from Omarska and Keraterm camps, described by UN experts as "death camps" where many Muslim prisoners were beaten, tortured and murdered.

Solicitor Karen Mason, for Two-Ten, said it distributed press releases as provided by clients without any editorial input or amendment.

Later ITN said it was happy to accept the apology. "ITN and its correspondents have taken legal action against Living Marxism's libels with reluctance.

"We and our journalists are proud of our reputation for fairness and accuracy. Living Marxism's untrue allegations were too serious to be allowed to go unchallenged."

A separate libel action against the magazine and its editor, Mick Hume, is still being pursued by ITN.

Mr Hume said Living Marxism would continue its fight with ITN: "The apology from Two-Ten Communications has no bearing on the issues at stake in LM's own libel battle with ITN."

Happy and Glorious, a 6 ft high sculpture of fibreglass, acrylic and jewels by Sean Read, on show in Glasgow until Sunday, in the Art in the Square fair PHOTOGRAPH: KIPPA MATTHEWS

Chef wins right to eschew meat

Geoffrey Gibbs

VEGETARIANS were hailing a victory for conscientious objection yesterday after a chef who lost his job because he refused to cook meat or fish won an industrial tribunal appeal against having his benefits stopped.

Simon Beavis, a vegetarian since the age of 12, trained in top London restaurants, where he enjoyed a reputation for his chickpea curry.

But culinary reputations counted for nothing with officialdom in Penzance when he started looking for work as a vegetarian chef in November.

When he said he was not prepared to cook meat, the local Benefits Agency staff told him he was restricting his chances of employment and stopped his Job Seeker's allowance and housing benefits.

Mr Beavis, aged 26, a single parent with a three-year-old daughter, took his stand after quitting his job in a seafood restaurant last summer because he could not stomach having to boil lobsters. He claimed that had he been Jewish he would not have been expected to cook pork, because it would have offended his religious and ethical senses, but because he had taken a moral stand as a vegetarian he had no rights.

After trying to live without income, he eventually had to back down but he decided to take the original Benefits Agency decision to a tribunal in a case which was backed by the Vegetarian Society.

Mr Beavis, who has now turned his back on the kitchen in favour of a fruit-growing business, hailed this week's tribunal ruling as a great victory for vegetarians.

"Hopefully now no one will be forced into jobs they really feel morally and ethically opposed to."

Vegetarian Society spokesman Chris Dessant said the case had vindicated Mr Beavis's position.

"It is good news for every vegetarian. The clear implication is that it is wrong for the Government to force somebody to work against his ethics."

Drink 'health threat'

Chris Mihill
Medical Correspondent

THE Government's decision to raise the recommended levels of safe drinking could lead to an increase in problem drinking, researchers say today.

The research by Helen Colhoun and colleagues is likely to reopen the debate about the Government's wisdom in increasing "sensible" drinking limits. The increase came shortly before Christmas 1995 amid widespread criticism from medical and alcohol campaigners, who called it a "boozer's charter".

The recommended limits were changed from 14 units a week for women and 21 for men to no more than two to three drinks a day for women and three or four drinks a day for men — a weekly limit of 21 units for women and 28 for men. A unit is half a pint of beer, a glass of wine or a single measure of spirits.

The doctors this time looked at some 32,000 adults who took part in health surveys, to calculate the average alcohol consumption in the 14 former regional health authority areas in England. Heavy drinking was defined as being above the old limits, together with evidence of physical dependency and psychological problems.

The researchers say, in the British Medical Journal, that those regions with the highest average consumption also had the highest levels of heavy drinking. The Northern region topped the league table for heavy drinking. The average consumption for men was 22.7 units a week, and for women 7.5 units.

Researchers in Australia, looking into whether the timing of drinking is important, say a little and often is sensible, binge drinking is dangerous. The study looked at drinking habits among 11,000 people who suffered heart attacks.

Those having one or two drinks a day, five or six days a week had a 60 per cent reduction in heart attacks compared with non-drinkers. Those who had a dozen drinks on one day a week, or consistently had more than 12 drinks a day, were 2.6 times more likely to have a heart attack than non-drinkers.

Friends in the North wins four broadcasting awards

OUR Friends in the North, BBC2's saga chronicling the lives of a group of Geordie friends through three turbulent decades, will today pick up four awards from the Broadcasting Press Guild, *writes Andrew Culf.*

It has won best drama serial, best actor and actress for Christopher Eccleston and Gina McKee, and the writer's award for Peter Flannery.

Michael Grade, who has resigned after nine years as Channel 4's chief executive, will be presented with the Harvey Lee Award for an outstanding contribution to broadcasting.

Other winners of the awards, voted for by 90 broadcasting and media journalists, include: Hillsborough, ITV (single drama); The House, BBC2 (documentary series); Quality Time, BBC2 (single documentary); TFI Friday, C4 (entertainment); Desmond Lynam, BBC1 (performer, non-acting); Charles Wheeler, BBC2 (journalist); Private Passions, Radio 3 (radio programme); Nick Ross, Radio 4 (radio broadcaster).

Fat cats stretch Russia's gulf

As Moscow's 'new Russians' grow richer the poorest go hungry in small provincial towns, where unemployment is rampant, benefits are running months late and the sole safety net is a single soup kitchen. **David Hearst** reports from Yuzha, where four out of five people live below the poverty line

Valery Ruzavin, a plasterer in Yuzha who last worked six years ago, sits in his flat, unlit for two years. He puts food on the family table by fishing PHOTOGRAPH: GLEB KOSORUKOV

BORIS the blue-suited businessman was rich enough to be coy about giving his full name. He was in two minds. Should he buy his layabout son the Reebok trainers at £90 a pair, or go for the DMX Series 2000 at £130? He chose the pricier shoe: "You know, these are only for show. The only place he walks is to the bar."

At another shop down the road, a sales assistant dangled a heavy gold Cartier watch, price £16,000, from her fingers. The shop's three bodyguards exchanged dark looks. "We sell about two or three of these tanks a week," she said.

The main Mitsubishi dealer was lauding the virtues of the Pajero: dual airbags, leather seats, remote-control shock absorbers. Yours for just £40,000.

Rolf Company Limited sells 800 of them a year. Its spokesman, Valery Tarakanov, said: "Many journalists are writing that *Jeepi* [off-road cars] are for gangsters. But our customers are respectable businessmen who want a luxury car for our awful roads."

But all that is four hours away, in the Klondike atmosphere of Moscow, where "new Russians" spend their wealth in extravagant gestures, as if the expensive watches and cars were trinkets to be fondled then thrown into a coffer of unused toys.

It is in small provincial towns like Yuzha that the dark side of Russia's increasingly brutal social contrasts can be seen. Here in Ivanova region, the poorest of the unemployed, the elderly and the sick are going hungry.

No one in the Lipatova household had eaten for three days. Not Valentina, aged 37, nor her mother, aged 70, who was moaning on the bed, nor her white-faced seven-year-old son Sacha, who was sick with the flu.

"The fridge still works," Valentina said, as though surprised. "But it's no use; it's empty."

When the state benefits still arrived, the household of six lived on a diet of potatoes, chicken cubes, bread and tea. But Valentina last received dole money a year ago. Her mother's pension of £33 and the £15 child benefit are three months late.

No one stirred in the two-bedroom flat in a log-built house. "There's nothing to eat," said Valentina, her hand sweeping over a table covered in years of grime.

"What do you expect?" said a neighbour, steering his goat into a pen outside. "Too many children. While the rest of us are out digging potatoes, her husband sits on his arse looking out of the window." Even poverty has its pecking order.

Valery Ruzavin, a plasterer who last worked six years ago, feeds his family by fishing. About 3lb of fish earned 8,000 roubles (90p) in the local market, with which his mother bought potatoes.

The lights went out in the flat two years ago. The only decoration is a child's drawing of a happy hare.

The economy of Yuzha has all but collapsed, and with it the will to do anything about it. At the centre of the town and its troubles is a textile mill built in pre-revolutionary times by a wealthy merchant.

Deprived of cheap cotton from Uzbekistan, the factory laid off all but 1,400 workers, then was privatised and sold on to an investment company in Moscow. They were not answering the phone this week, even to the town's mayor.

The result is that 18.5 per cent of the Yuzha region's population of 30,000 are officially registered as unemployed. Twice that figure are thought to be out of work. Yuzha has the dubious distinction of being the poorest region in Russia. More than 80 per of the population live below the poverty line.

With these statistics come others — 14 new cases of tuberculosis this year alone, and an infant mortality rate of 24 per thousand. The town's one safety net is a soup kitchen and hostel which feeds 30 people at at time in 20-day shifts. That way the queue of 400 of the town's poorest get three weeks of a good diet once a year.

There was little chatter in the small room as its hungry people hurriedly ate. Three pregnant single mothers sat at one table, while *Chernobylsi* — the former army reservists who shovelled radioactive fallout from the reactor — sat at another.

> 'The Soviet state used us, and now the Russian one is throwing us away'

Viktor Sekelin got his invalidity pension for December a week ago. "You know, the story was that the lads volunteered for Chernobyl. We weren't given any choice, and it was years before they admitted the doses we received. The Soviet state used us, and now the Russian one is throwing us away."

Elsewhere, the *Chernobylsi* have blocked railway lines in protest at the non-payment of their pensions. Mr Sekelin said: "We are too frightened. I am a boilermaker and I need work, and besides, who wants to shed more of their blood for this country?"

The phone on the desk of the town's head of administration rang every few minutes. Valentina Sisuyeva belonged to the party created by the Russian prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, but her support for the fat cats of Moscow soon crumbled.

"Look, I am a woman. I am not a politician. The cotton from Uzbekistan has not come. The army is crying out for clothes, but there are no orders, and the factory has been bought by a New Russian. I don't know what is going on inside."

Yeltsin comes bearing gifts

Ian Traynor in Bonn

THE Russians just cannot keep away from Baden-Baden. It was Boris Yeltsin's turn yesterday. Hot on the heels of three Russian tsars and the school of 19th century geniuses who created the Great Russian Novel, President Yeltsin, his wife Naina and daughter Tatiana lived it up among the monied patrons of the ritzy resort.

"This is a nice town you've got here," Mr Yeltsin told the locals as he went on a brief walkabout in the Black Forest German spa, which was a fixture on the Grand Tour itinerary of the last century.

Russians have regularly found Baden-Baden a nice town. Fresh from sending Napoleon packing, Tsar Alexander I pitched up there in 1813, setting a trend for future rulers, imperial or republican, to follow.

Russia's literary royalty, too, frittered away fortunes at the gaming tables of Baden-Baden.

Turgenev, whose short novel Smoke is set in the resort, stayed five years. Dostoyevsky, another regular visitor, set his novel The Gambler in Baden-Baden.

Gogol and Tolstoy took the waters and thousands of White Russians arrived thee after the revolution, helping to establish the spa's "Russian quarter".

President Yeltsin came to south-west Germany bearing gifts in an attempt to assuage Germans' fury at Russia's reluctance to return the tens of thousands of art objects looted by the Red Army at the end of the war.

There were no Impressionist masterpieces, Old Masters, priceless antiques, or Gutenberg Bibles in Mr Yeltsin's luggage. Rather, he promised to give Bonn the microfilmed party records of old East Germany's Communist Party.

And he brought 11 cases of the personal papers of Walter Rathenau, the Weimar Republic foreign minister and architect of the Rapallo Treaty between the Russians and the Germans in 1922, the same year Rathenau, a Jew, was assassinated by German rightwing zealots.

The 11 cases were only part of the Rathenau files, since the entire collection, said Helmut Kohl, weighs more than a ton. The papers have been gathering dust for more than half a century in the KGB's stash of documents pillaged during the war.

Mr Yeltsin also promised more goodies to come — as a symbol of what Mr Kohl described as the "excellent" relationship between Germany and Russia.

'Monstrous budget crisis' means tighter belts

THE Russian government has prepared an emergency belt-tightening plan to ease a "monstrous budget crisis", the first deputy prime minister, Anatoly Chubais, told parliament yesterday.

Millions of Russian workers have not been paid for months, and Mr Chubais's plan to slash spending indicates that the crisis is worsening, despite President Boris Yeltsin's government shake-up.

Mr Chubais, who is also the finance minister, said the revenue collection in the first quarter of this year amounted to only 57 per cent of the government target. Spending was only 63 per cent of the planned level, and the budget deficit had swollen.

Russia was in the midst of "a monstrous budget crisis, the scale of which calls into question the ability of the state to perform its functions," he told the upper house. — AP.

John Major once wanted to be a bus conductor.

He didn't make it. So what's he doing with a busman's pension?

When the National Bus Company was privatised, the Government plundered the pension fund. Each pensioner is losing around £1,000 a year. The Ombudsman has told the Government to give back the money. But it won't.

If you think this is unfair, write to John Major or your local parliamentary candidate, asking why the pensioners aren't getting their money.

Give the B.E.S.T pensioners their money back. It's the honest thing to do, John.

The B.E.S.T (Bus Employees Superannuation Trust) Action Group is supported by the Transport & General Workers Union. For further information or a campaign pack, contact the T&G on 0800 37 44 61.

T&G

News in brief

Hong Kong walkout

Democrats walked out of a consultation meeting with Hong Kong's incoming government yesterday, highlighting the conflict over plans to curb civil liberties when China takes over on July 1.

The Democratic Party representatives claimed the meeting was a charade to portray the incoming government as open to dissent. — AP.

Envoys protest

Kenya told foreign embassies yesterday to respect diplomatic protocol after a collective protest by the US, European Union and Japanese envoys about recent police actions and call for free speech and assembly before this year's elections. — Reuter.

Dole to the rescue

Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, said yesterday that he would pay a $300,000 (£185,000) penalty for an ethics violation with a loan from the former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole. — Reuter.

Vatican plea

Child pornography and sex tourism should be made criminal offences, the Vatican told the UN Human Rights Commission in a speech released yesterday. — Reuter.

Jail terms upheld

South Korea's supreme court yesterday upheld jail terms on former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo of life and 17 years respectively for leading a 1979 coup and ordering the massacre of pro-democracy protesters. — AP.

European ministers told to come clean

THE European ombudsman, Jacob Soderman, has ordered the European Union's council of ministers to respond to a complaint from a British journalist in what is being seen as a key challenge to EU secrecy, *writes Stephen Bates in Brussels*

Mr Soderman's intervention arises from a complaint by Tony Bunyan, editor of the civil liberties magazine Statewatch, that the council had refused to show him agendas relating to meetings held up to three years ago.

Mr Soderman ordered the council yesterday to respond within six weeks and tell him why it had denied access to the documents.

The move is the latest challenge to the EU's supposed commitment to accessibility and transparency in decision-making. In 1995 the Guardian successfully appealed to the European Court to force the disclosure of council documents.

Officials at the council and the ombudsman's office see the Statewatch case as a key test of whether Mr Soderman, a former Finnish government minister, can prevail over EU institutions. He told the council he was prepared to take the matter to the European Court.

French fear crop failure

FRANCE'S biggest farmers union said yesterday that it had set up a crisis team to keep track of crop conditions throughout the country as fears of a drought increase.

But the FNSEA, eager to prevent a "drought psychosis" in France, said the situation did not yet warrant a full-scale drought action plan.

"To date the situation is not irreversible. Spring sowings are not complete and winter crops are not yet under threat," it said.

Rainfall has been as much as 50 per cent below normal levels since January in the north of France — and even lower in the south, according to the weather service Meteo France.

The situation has already led the authorities to curb irrigation in several departments, and fears of a prolonged drought in grain regions have pushed up the local price of wheat. — Reuter.

General 'pushed' Ceausescu

Roxana Dascalu in Bucharest

A GENERAL who held key jobs in Romania's first post-communist government said yesterday he had persuaded the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu into his doomed flight from power in 1989.

Victor Stanculescu, a former economy, defence and industry minister, said a handful of people who seized power during the revolt had decided Ceausescu's fate on Christmas Day in a defence ministry lavatory — "it was the only safe place to talk".

"I persuaded him and his wife Elena to flee Bucharest by helicopter, to escape lynching," Gen Stanculescu, now a businessman, told a television programme. The couple were summarily tried, then shot by firing squad in a barracks north-west of Bucharest. — Reuter.

Like many of Thatcher's children, my earliest memory of politics is the morning of May 4, 1979. It's been an unfortunate political generation to belong to.

Decca Aitkenhead

This section, page 13

Netanyahu under pressure

Leader who lost friends

Shyam Bhatia in Jerusalem

REGARDLESS of whether the Israeli attorney-general, Elyakim Rubinstein, decides to press charges against Binyamin Netanyahu, it seems clear that the prime minister's days in office are numbered.

Ten months after his election triumph, Mr Netanyahu appears to be near the end of his political career. Even if Mr Rubinstein rejects police recommendations to indict the prime minister on criminal charges of fraud and breach of trust, there is serious doubt whether he can cling on.

It is true that he remains innocent until proven guilty by a court of law, but the damage has already been done. Many Israelis wonder whether the prime minister, can continue to operate as if nothing has changed.

His disastrous policies can be traced back to the day he took office

Some argue that the past 10 months of Mr Netanyahu's government have been the worst in the history of the Jewish state. He is accused by critics of plunging the country back into a condition of international isolation, to a point where another Middle East war is considered a possibility.

Mr Netanyahu's disastrous policies can be traced back almost to the day he entered office. The first of his gambles to turn sour was the ill-advised opening of an archaeological tunnel close to the Al Aqsa mosque in the old city of Jerusalem. The result was several days of bloody clashes in which 15 Israeli soldiers and 80 Palestinians died.

The entire peace process was at stake when Israel's new peace partner, the Palestinian police, turned their guns on the Israeli army.

Just before his election, Mr Netanyahu made no secret of his contempt for the Oslo peace accords, which he claimed jeopardised the existence of the Jewish state.

Much of his venom was directed at the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, whom he described as an "arch-terrorist with Jewish blood on his hands".

For three months he shunned Mr Arafat, but under United States pressure he finally shook hands with him at the Erez checkpoint outside Gaza.

Again under US pressure, he was forced to implement the Hebron agreement by handing over 80 per cent of the West Bank city to Mr Arafat's administration. But his manoeuvring and delays poisoned the atmosphere, not only with the Palestinians but with the rest of the Arab world.

It is a measure of the contempt in which he is held that Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian newspapers ridicule him as the "stinking man".

Representatives at a recent Arab League meeting in Cairo decided to revive the economic boycott of Israel. Their decision was prompted by two recent Netanyahu policy initiatives: the less-than-generous Israeli military withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and the decision to build a new Jewish settlement in Arab East Jerusalem.

In Israel, Mr Netanyahu has also managed to alienate long-standing friends and allies, as well as the media, the army and, now, the police.

The first Israeli prime minister to be directly elected, he believes that he alone has a mandate to rule. This explains why he looks to the White House as a model for his own style of government.

Indeed, he has broken with tradition by appointing advisers on almost every subject, undermining his cabinet colleagues. "Netanyahu is dangerous for Israel," is only one of the slogans repeated by his critics, who say he is simply too inexperienced.

But Mr Netanyahu is also known as a determined fighter. Today he is fighting for his political survival.

Leader comment, page 12

Health minister Yehoshua Matza reassures Mr Netanyahu at a Likud party meeting yesterday PHOTOGRAPH: HAVAKUK LEVISON

MPs toe party line, but voters split

ISRAELI voters were divided yesterday over whether Mr Netanyahu should step down, while some MPs in his governing Likud party insisted the issue was not the prime minister's culpability but the leaking of a confidential police report, *writes Shyam Bhatia in Jerusalem.*

"This is the real problem," Likud MP Uzi Landau told Israel Radio. "It jeopardises civil rights. No Israeli knows what's in the report, none of the public figures involved know how to protect themselves."

The Labour opposition was unanimous in calling for Mr Netanyahu's resignation. Labour MP Ehud Barak, a contender for the party leadership, said: "Thousands of Likud and other voters are asking if this is the set of values and practices we want. The important thing is that the police have made this kind of recommendation."

Bracha Mandel, a student, said: "Netanyahu's been making a lot of mistakes; he's not as bad as [former Labour prime minister Shimon] Peres, but I don't trust him either. If he is found guilty, then, yes, he should order new elections."

Alan Green, a greengrocer, said: "He should resign because he shouldn't have been elected in the first place ... the fact that he doesn't do so means he is covering up."

Jonathan Leshem, an electrical engineer, was more charitable: "So far nothing is proven, the prime minister should wait for the decision of the attorney general. I don't believe the police automatically, there may be a conspiracy."

Judith Seton, a housewife, urged caution: "We should wait until Sunday, if he goes to trial then he should resign. I think he was tripped up by some of his advisers."

US fears peace is put on hold

Martin Walker in Washington

THE White House put out a firm party line yesterday to ensure that all US officials were chorusing that the plight of Binyamin Netanyahu was "an internal Israeli matter" on which the US took no view.

In reality, the Netanyahu crisis dominated much of the discussion on Wednesday evening at President Clinton's dinner party seminar for 30 senior congressmen, at which he had hoped to rally bipartisan support for "constructive engagement" with China, and to ratify the chemical warfare treaty.

"It looks like the peace process is going nowhere fast, except maybe downhill if Arafat can't control his crazies," said one congressional source. "But it looks like we won't know what this means for Netanyahu till after Passover next week."

That meeting, studiously avoided by the chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, Jesse Helms, and by the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, was one of the few places in Washington where Mr Netanyahu could claim some friends. But his support among Republican conservatives hardly compensates for the administration's annoyance at his decision to break ground on the Har Homa settlement.

In fact, US-Israeli relations have never quite recovered from President Clinton's open partiality for Shimon Peres, Mr Netanyahu's defeated opponent in last year's elections. But the White House rule yesterday was discretion.

"We consider this a domestic legal matter that the Israeli government and the people of Israel have to resolve," the White House spokesman, Mike McCurry, said yesterday. He refused to speculate on the impact of the crisis on Mr Netanyahu's troubled relations with the Palestinians and merely reaffirmed US commitment to the peace process.

In private, initial optimism that the peace process might benefit from the replacement of the prickly rightwinger was giving way to a more troubled analysis, with fears that negotiations could be shelved for the duration of the crisis.

"Things were just starting to get moving again with the Arafat talks in Malta and with Dennis Ross back in the region," commented one State Department source. "However this plays out, the entire Israeli political system is going to be distracted. We could all be on hold for some time."

The US has already voiced its frustration with Mr Netanyahu and the stalling of the peace process when it sent the Middle East special envoy Dennis Ross to the region this week with a tough demand for the two sides to restart negotiations if they wanted the US to stay strongly involved.

"Dennis will deliver a pretty hard-edged message about the realities of what is needed in order for us to play a role," said the secretary of state, Madeleine Albright.

"The Palestinians need to understand that Israelis can't operate in an insecure environment. And the Israelis need to understand that taking actions which pre-empt some of the final status issues makes it difficult for the Palestinians to negotiate."

Chaim Herzog dies, aged 78

Foreign Staff

CHAIM HERZOG, a soldier, historian and diplomat who was Israel's longest-serving president, died yesterday. He was 78.

Israel's army radio interrupted its broadcast to announce the death of Herzog, president from 1983 to 1993.

He suffered heart failure after contracting pneumonia in the United States, a Tel Hashomer Hospital in Tel Aviv said.

"Herzog was the most statesman-like man Israel ever knew," Shimon Peres, the former prime minister, said. He was "a man of war who loved peace".

Obituary, page 23

Not so much a channel, more a huge gulf

ON US

Old British stereotypes are being dispelled in Spain, writes **Adela Gooch** in Madrid

MAIPA recalls her first trip to Britain. Like many Spaniards, she went to learn English, made foreign rather than native friends, then headed back home.

"I stopped off in Paris and when I got there I felt an enormous sense of relief. It wasn't home, but I felt at home in a way I never could in England."

Spaniards have a keen sense that there is a gulf between Britain and the rest of Europe. It can make them tolerant and appreciative of the contrast with Spain.

"I can see why the British have problems with Europe — there are just so many differences," said Alvaro, an engineer. "It just isn't the Continent."

But the scope for mutual incomprehension is considerable, and often accompanied by a strong tendency to stereotype. "It's always foggy in London, isn't it," remarked Lucia, a dressmaker.

AS the British see Spain as the land of bullfighters and castanets, to Spaniards the true Englishman still wears a bowler hat, takes afternoon tea at four and rides in a double-decker bus.

The clichéd view is fostered by television series such as Upstairs Downstairs — hugely popular in Spain — and by period films. Spaniards read rather less than Britons, but the Times is famous, the Sun notorious, and the success of Hello — the English version of the successful Spanish magazine Hola — is a source of pride.

The country's only large chain of department stores is called "EL Corte Inglés" (The English Cut), because no one was thought to dress as well as the British. The clash with reality in the shape of package tourists can be harsh, although Benny Hill, still frequently shown in Spain, should have shown that another type of Englishman existed.

"When we see your hooligans — getting drunk in bars and burning on the beaches — we can't help but wonder what happened to English manners," said Rafael, an art critic.

The historical relationship has veered between antagonism and mutual regard, from the Armada to the Peninsular War, known in Spain as the War of Independence from France. Spaniards may admire British traditions — democracy and tolerance — but the cultural and political model has always been French.

Nothing symbolises British decay to Spaniards more than the sorry state of the royal family. Their interest has waned, but one particular aspect continues to intrigue: "How can Charles possibly prefer that dreary Camilla to beautiful Diana?" is a question frequently asked.

Spaniards have always considered Prince Charles something of a joke, depicting him in cartoons with huge flapping ears. But they are still pleased and surprised by favourable comparisons with their own royal family.

"We're not really monarchists but we like our present king," said Enrique, an economist. "You are monarchists but don't like your future king."

Margaret Thatcher is universally admired as a strong figure. "How can you throw the Tories out at the election?" demanded Diego, a banker. "After everything they've done for Britain — unemployment at 7 per cent. We're at least double."

'I can see why the British have problems with Europe: there are many differences'

Others are more sceptical. "Only a country as tolerant as Britain could have resisted the Thatcher revolution. In Spain it's out of the question," said Carlos, a writer. "It is intriguing that Blair is seen as successful because he's taken on Thatcher's values."

But the British are also considered distant and cold. "They care more about their dogs than their children," said Manuela, who helps her husband run a bar. "Those horrible crimes you have there — it just wouldn't happen in Spain."

Her niece Susana added: "I was an au pair and it wasn't much fun. The family made me work really hard. The children were little horrors. And after work there was nothing much to do. English people don't really know how to enjoy themselves."

The British can also appear ungrateful. Alberto, a doctor, recalled treating an English animal-rights activist after she was gored by a bull. "We looked after her well. She was in a bad way, and we respected her views and thought we'd become friends. She was in our hospital for several weeks, then she left, and and we never heard from her. I was very surprised at that."

The Welsh, Scots and, in particular, the Irish often enjoy a better reputation than the British.

"The Irish are Catholics like us and maybe for that reason it's easier for us to understand them," says Juan Pablo, an architect.

After 13 years of Socialist rule, Spain's conservative government is firming up market-oriented policies, but without a hint of Euroscepticism.

"I suppose we've always worried about the old French adage that Africa begins at the Pyrenees. Hence our Euro-fervour. I can see why it's different for Britain, which is linked to the Commonwealth and to the United States," said Jorge, a businessman.

But some Spaniards are angered by Britain's apparent lack of commitment to Europe. Rumours of Anglo-Saxon plots to stifle the euro at birth are rife, as is a sense that the arrogant north wants to keep the Latin south out of monetary union.

"Referring to us as Pigs [Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain] or the garlic belt — that's pretty awful," said Isabel, an insurance broker.

"When will Britain return Gibraltar?" is also a frequent cry. The issue touches the national inferiority complex still prevalent after Spain's 40 years of ostracism while Franco was in power.

"We're a proper democracy now — why can't we have Gibraltar back?" Isidro, a retail executive, asks indignantly.

Next: In the final part of the series, Ian Traynor examines German views of Britain.

Tourists night-clubbing in Benidorm fail to live up to Spanish image of Britain PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD MILDENHALL

Mandela sets summit

Chris McGreal in Johannesburg

SOUTH AFRICA says it has arranged a summit between President Mobutu Sese Seko and the increasingly triumphant Zairean rebels in an attempt to establish a transitional government before a battle for control of the capital, Kinshasa.

President Nelson Mandela said he had issued a formal invitation to Mr Mobutu to attend talks after meeting the Zairean rebel leader, Laurent Kabila, on Wednesday.

Mr Mobutu's information minister, Kin-Kiey Mulumba, sees no obstacles to a first meeting between the two sides once a venue and time are agreed. "Things are getting clearer. Plans are afoot for a meeting between the head of state and the rebel leader. This meeting is imminent," he said.

If Mr Mobutu does attend face-to-face talks it will be a big climbdown from his previous refusal to meet the rebels, and Mr Kabila appears not to have retreated from his insistence that negotiations must focus on Mr Mobutu's abdication.

After meeting Mr Kabila, Mr Mandela expressed confidence that he favoured a peaceful resolution to the war, which has carried his Rwandan-backed Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire across more than half the country in six months.

"He doesn't want a military solution. He wants a solution which will receive the support of President Mobutu and he has also made it clear that he has no intention of doing anything which will humiliate President Mobutu," Mr Mandela said.

Yet Mr Kabila has gone along with the South African initiative as much for appearances as from any belief that it will succeed.

He first visited South Africa in February under pressure from his allies — particularly Washington — not to appear committed only to war. He could also ill afford to offend South Africa's revered statesman since the country will be a crucial ally in helping to rebuild Zaire.

He went again more willingly after Mr Mandela addressed him as "General Kabila". The title conferred a degree of international recognition, to the consternation of the Mobutu regime.

This time Mr Mandela went so far as to refer to him as "President Kabila" in the same sentence in which he talked about President Mobutu, effectively offering them equal status.Despite the assurances Mr Mandela says he has received, it is evident that Mr Kabila favours a military solution unless Mr Mobutu surrenders power.

A Zairean woman with worthless money in Lubumbashi

Chirac considers election

JACQUES CHIRAC is expected to make a television broadcast next week to reveal whether he will take the biggest gamble of his political life by calling a snap general election, or merely settle for a cabinet reshuffle.

Despite several denials by Elysée officials that the president wanted to bring forward the parliamentary poll due next March, conservative politicians kept alive the possibility by saying that an early vote would ensure stability during negotiations on the European single currency.

Political commentators were divided last night on what the presidential entourage meant by saying that Mr Chirac was ready to take an important initiative. Le Monde newspaper suggested that the presidential broadcast could be intended to prepare public opinion for unpopular budgetary and social measures.

Leading members of the Gaullist-led coalition increased speculation about a possible dissolution by saying that it had more advantages than disadvantages.

Mr Chirac's critics said the uncertainty about his intentions would only add to the gathering impression of indecisiveness.

The strongest support for a dissolution of the national assembly came from the chairman of its legislation commission, Pierre Mazeaud, who said it would help France prepare for difficulties in the autumn with the single currency and other European matters.

But cabinet members, including the education minister François Bayrou of the centrist UDF said Mr Chirac and his prime minister, Alain Juppé, were still only reflecting on the best strategy to ensure that France was strong enough — politically and economically — on Europe.

If Mr Chirac wants an early election it will be a matter of double or quits. With 484 of the 577 national assembly seats held by the right, he would have no difficulty forcing through welfare and other budgetary cuts to meet unexpectedly heavy deficits and ensure that France is on target for EMU.

But some of his advisers feel that cuts could be so unpopular that the right would inevitably be defeated next March, whereas even a narrow victory in early elections — which would have to be held in June — would produce political stability for the next five years.

Rightwing MPs are generally cool on the idea of seeing their mandates cut short. Opinion polls forecast that the coalition would lose as many as 200 seats if a general election were held now, but are divided on whether the left or the right would win a narrow majority.

The son and heir of the dubious House of Zog plans to restore the dynasty to the throne after 58 years in exile. But would the country want a monarch, particularly one once deported for arms dealing?

Julian Borger reports from Tirana

Italian soldiers form a convoy at the Albanian port of Durres, preparing to go to Fier. Italian troops are heading the 6,000-strong multinational force to secure humanitarian aid deliveries there PHOTOGRAPH: LUCA BRUNO

Man who would be king returns to claim Albania

AT ALBANIA'S greatest hour of need, as foreign forces arrive to fill the vacuum left by administrative collapse, the royal banner of the House of Zog has been raised at a modest villa in central Tirana.

Leka, son of Zog — Albania's pre-war monarch — returned last weekend after a 58-year exile. He is now planning a royal restoration from the lounge of his rented house, as a crowd of tearful royalists bustles around the gates in hope of an audience.

The 6ft 8in chain-smoking man who would be king has hitherto supported himself by exporting minerals and heavy machinery to the Middle East and Asia from Johannesburg. The South African years have left an audible trace in the accents of his courtiers.

Leka said he was back to stay and that he had won cross-party support for a referendum on the restoration of a constitutional monarchy. "The only question is when ... I feel there is a strong enough base among the Albanian people," he said.

The monarchist standard which hangs from the balcony is an Albanian flag with alterations — a black double-headed eagle on a red background, with the addition of a crown hovering a few inches above the bird's twin heads — where the star used to be under communism.

The crown is an unusual piece of headgear — roughly triangular with two points sticking out at an acute angle. A courtier explains that these are stylised ram's horns from the ancient crown of Skanderbeg, Albania's 15th-century hero.

With a handful of knights, Skanderbeg held back the advance of the Ottoman empire for nearly 25 years, winning the papal accolade "Defender of Christ". His statue dominates central Tirana. Skanderbeg's legacy is a wistful longing for strong rule, and Albanians have often been prepared to accept a tough foreign leader in return for a degree of protection.

Leka, right, fled Albania when three days old with his father King Zog, left, to sit out the war at the Ritz

The 6,000-strong Italian-led force has been widely welcomed after the breakdown of law and order caused by the collapse of a string of shady investment schemes.

At an earlier time of national crisis, during Albania's birth pangs more than 80 years ago, the two-horned crown was even offered to a British Conservative MP, Aubrey Herbert.

Mr Herbert travelled extensively in Albania before the first world war offering to mediate between rival clans and nationalist leaders. Prominent Albanians twice offered him the crown, but he turned it down, partly because it appeared to be an unsalaried position.

Tory MPs no longer inspire the same confidence. But Albanians also have mixed views on Leka's claims to leadership. The Zog dynasty stretches only as far back as Leka's father, Ahmed Bey Zogu, a northern chieftain who persuaded parliament to proclaim him monarch in 1928. His rule lasted 11 years, an authoritarian period now viewed by his countrymen with ambivalence.

"He was a clever dictator, and an ambitious one, but in the end not a trustworthy one," is the judgment of Paskal Milo, a historian and social democrat politician.

King Zog appealed for resistance when Mussolini invaded in 1939, but while his supporters were fighting the Italians on the beaches, he fled to Greece with his wife, the three-day-old Leka, and much of the royal treasury. They sat out most of the war at the Ritz in London.

Fifty-eight years on, Zog's heir defends his father's hurried departure in business terms.

"There's no percentage in fighting on two fronts," he said, pointing out that the Yugoslavs were also threatening from the north.

"If he'd stayed he would have been a vassal of the Italian fascist government and that would have been unacceptable both for the nation and my father."

Leka's own life has not been controversy-free. He was ejected from Spain in 1980 after being charged with arms dealing. He says he was framed on the orders of the great powers, nervous about his appeals to Albanian nationalism.

"They had to have some excuse," he said.

The great powers could have reason to be uneasy. The would-be monarch wants to redraw national boundaries to create a "Greater Albania" including ethnic Albanian territory in Serbia and Macedonia.

"Germany was reunited. Why can't Albania be reunited?" he argues between puffs on his ever-present Rothmans.

"As long as Albania is divided there will be problems in the Balkans."

Outside, the crowd is becoming impatient, and a courtier slips in, pointing at his watch. Leka emerges into the spring sunlight and is immediately grabbed by a middle-aged woman, her eyes full of tears. Other royalists show they have not forgotten the old ways by rendering the Zogist salute, bringing their right forearms horizontally across their chests.

Despite this demonstration that there are some Albanians prepared to make the necessary leap of faith, few pundits believe he has much of a chance in a referendum. "Absolutely none," said Mr Milo.

● Chancellor Franz Vranitzky of Austria, the international mediator for Albania, said in Tirana yesterday that all parties in the unity government had agreed that elections should take place on June 21, but were not agreed on the conditions.

Italians prefer fake GP to real thing

John Hooper in Rome

CAN a fake ever be better than the real thing? The question has intrigued the art world for generations, but thanks to recent events in an obscure Piedmontese village it is now of relevance to the medical profession too.

Giuseppe Ariotti is, by all accounts, a model GP — praised by locals for his willingness to pay house calls, the accuracy of his diagnoses and the sagacity of his prognoses. Unfortunately, he is not actually a doctor. Indeed, he does not even have a degree in medicine.

Earlier this week Mr Ariotti was charged with acting under false pretences and practising a profession without the necessary qualifications. That much is not particularly exceptional: bogus doctors have, from time to time, been unmasked in Italy, and elsewhere.

What makes Mr Ariotti's case remarkable is that many of his patients would rather have him than a "real" doctor. And they include one of Italy's most respected intellectuals. The award-winning author Sebastiano Vassalli came to Mr Ariotti's defence yesterday in a letter to the daily newspaper La Stampa.

"I am, and wish to continue being, a patient of the bogus doctor," the novelist declared. "I am not an innocent open to being swindled. I know doctors with first class honours degrees whom I would not trust to take care of my fingernails. Yet I have faith in this bogus doctor."

Mr Vassalli, several of whose books, including The Chimera, have been translated into English, revealed that the counterfeit GP's lack of credentials was known not only to his patients but even to some people in the medical profession.

"I take his advice on medicines, which a doctor with a proper prescription pad then does me the favour of prescribing," wrote Mr Vassalli. The author suggested that prosecutors had better things to do than hound the phoney physician of Casalbeltrame.

"Giuseppe Ariotti," he said, "has never harmed nor swindled anyone."

Finland's mock meltdown helps test emergency response plans

Nerves frayed in dry run for nuclear catastrophe

Jon Henley in Helsinki

THINGS were not going swimmingly at the Lovilsa nuclear power plant in southern Finland. A light aircraft had crashed into its electricity supply lines and caused the water pumps for the primary cooling system fail, threatening to send one of the twin 445MW reactors into meltdown and cover the Baltic states, Poland, Belarus and large parts of eastern Russia with radioactive dust.

As if that were not enough, a gas pipeline had burst and the power station was in the middle of its annual maintenance programme.

Fortunately a senior safety inspector of the Finnish interior ministry was in charge of yesterday's "Inex-2-Fin" international nuclear disaster exercise.

"It's going okay," Tarmo Kopare said. "Look, it may sound unrealistic, but we must assume things like this can happen. We wouldn't create an exercise like this if all the experts thought such a catastrophic combination of events was impossible."

The drill, part of a three-year operation organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's nuclear energy agency, was designed to test the responses of local and national authorities in 27 countries to a nuclear catastrophe: how they exchange information, release it to the public and media, and handle potential evacuations.

"If you're going to evacuate people, you should always strive to do it in the threat phase," said Leif Blomqvist, a chief instructor at the Finnish emergency services' college and one of the event's planners.

"If a release of radioactive material started very suddenly, it would be best to shelter inside. But then, a large release would not be that instantaneous. It all depends, really."

As emergency response teams and radiation experts in Europe, Japan and South Korea monitored the situation, the simulated catastrophe began to unfold.

Not everyone was as relaxed about it as Mr Blomqvist. "Everything is not under control," Jukka Laaksonen, head of the Finnish Centre for Radiation and Nuclear Safety, admitted frankly to a mock press conference as meltdown neared.

Meanwhile Finnish firefighters, playing the general public, were enthusiastically bombarding the emergency services with panic-stricken phone calls, and nuclear physicists, playing themselves, were calculating the likely levels of fallout.

The events at Lovilsa, 60 miles east of Helsinki, were imaginary, but experts used the actual weather conditions to try to predict the likely trail of radioactive fallout, and what they would do if all this was for real.

After a cold front over southern Finland had dispersed by midday, winds strengthened towards the south-east and weathermen predicted that the first fallout would hit Estonia by early evening.

"They've been warned," Mr Laaksonen said.

The organisers used a World Wide Web site to carry mock media coverage of the disaster, including their own dummy press releases and fake news reports by journalists flown in for the event.

"The Internet means we can simulate what would be put on the radio and other mass media, and the authorities will have that information almost as in a real situation," Mr Blomqvist said.

The site was password-protected to avoid alarming innocent Web surfers, but proved too overloaded to be of much use.

Those taking part included Finland's Nordic neighbours, the Baltic states, Britain, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Switzerland.

Japan decided to join only at the last moment, apparently prompted by the prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's announcement of a formal investigation into the alleged cover-up of the country's worst-ever nuclear accident in March.

All those involved, including the World Health Organisation, the World Meteorological Organisation and the International Atomic Energy Agency, will assess the speed and quality of their reactions.

A few disgruntled role-playing journalists already knew what they thought, complaining that news of the first radiation leak was too slow to reach them.

"They just think we shouldn't say too much," said Leif Svensson, a Swedish reporter. "That's just plain wrong." But Tero Varjoranta, the safety centre's deputy director, was unconcerned.

"That's part of the idea," he said. "The whole point is to learn."

Japanese reactor corporation covered up radioactive leaks

JAPAN'S state-run Power Reactor and Nuclear Fuel Development Corporation failed to report 11 minor radioactive leaks at a reactor west of Tokyo, a provincial government official said yesterday.

Akio Shimasaki of the Fukui prefectural government's safety bureau said investigators discovered the leaks at the plant in the town of Tsuruga while inspecting records after a leak on Monday.

That leak was preceded by a fire and explosion at a fuel-reprocessing plant in Tokai, north-east of Tokyo, on March 11 in which low levels of radioactivity were released and 30 workers were mildly contaminated.

The Science and Technology Agency has filed a criminal complaint in the March 11 case, asking the police to pursue charges against the nuclear power corporation, known as Donen.

It says that three Donen officials falsified a report to the government about the incident.

Donen has admitted consistently covering up mishaps at its reactors.

In the 11 leaks in two years at the reactor in Tsuruga, the radiation levels almost equalled Monday's leak on at least two occasions, Mr Shimasaki said. — AP.

'We have allowed ouselves to grow into a bad-tempered, snarling, resentful member state'
Baroness Williams

'I come over here frequently, and I have the slight impression of coming back to a museum.'
Peter Ustinov

Major at meeting where plan to change Bill of Rights hatched

No 10 plan to help Hamilton

David Hencke

THE PLAN to alter Britain's 300-year-old Bill of Rights to enable Neil Hamilton to sue the Guardian for libel was hatched at a private meeting in Downing Street between the sacked minister, his wife, John Major and the Attorney-General, according to the lobbyist Ian Greer's memoirs.

The disclosure undermines statements made to Parliament by Lord Mackay, the Lord Chancellor, and Tony Newton, Leader of the Commons, that the Government was neutral about the matter. It shows that Downing Street misled the public about the Prime Minister's involvement in changing the law.

According to Mr Greer's book, at the "warm and friendly" meeting, which took place in November 1995 — a year after Mr Hamilton had been forced out of government — Mr Major listened "sympathetically" to their case that they had been wronged by the newspaper.

The disclosure of the meeting — admitted by both the Attorney-General and Lord Chancellor last night — contradicts Downing Street's denials that the Prime Minister was involved. The libel case collapsed spectacularly a year later.

A Downing Street spokesman told the London Evening Standard in October last year: "Neither the Prime Minister nor his office has ever been involved in this matter."

But according to Mr Greer's memoirs, it was at that meeting Sir Nicholas Lyell, the Attorney-General, suggested that there could be a way out of the impasse which had led to Mr Hamilton's action being halted by a legal judgment — which said that MPs could not sue in the courts over matters relating to their behaviour as parliamentarians.

Mr Greer claims that Sir Nicholas suggested introducing an amendment into the Defamation Bill enabling Mr Hamilton to sue. The private meeting was attended by John Major, his PPS John Ward, Sir Nicholas and Mr Newton. It was arranged by the Chief Whip, Alistair Goodlad, at the repeated request of Mr Hamilton's wife Christine.

According to Mr Greer's memoirs, the meeting agreed that the idea of an amendment was "a good idea . . . and Neil and Christine left Downing Street happier than they had been for some time".

Last night sources close to the Prime Minister put the proposal for the initiative changing the law firmly in the court of Mr. Hamilton — saying that it was the Hamiltons who had requested the meeting and Mr Hamilton proposed the clause so he could bring his libel action.

Records are said to show that he put forward three options, but was told that it must remain a matter for Parliament and not the Government. Sources declined to elaborate what happened after the meeting.

> 'Neil and Christine left Downing St happier than they had been for some time'

Mr Greer says that subsequently "the Government Whips' Office in the Lords set about secretly recruiting a sympathetic peer to introduce the amendment agreed at Downing Street". They settled on Lord Hoffman, a law lord. "Behind the scenes, peers were expected to lend their support, with the Whips pressured by Hamilton and his supporters all the way."

Mr Greer reveals that his company, IGA, "went into full-scale lobbying mode" to make sure the amendment was passed, using a friend, Lord Finsberg, as a link to the Government Whips' office in the Lords. Lady Thatcher, Lord Parkinson and Lord Tebbit were among the peers who voiced their support in advance of the vote.

Mr Greer says they then mounted a "huge lobbying operation" on the Commons "with Neil in close contact with the Whips".

When the matter came to be debated the following year, both Houses of Parliament were told — by the Lord Chancellor and the leader of the House of Commons — that the Government was "neutral" as to whether the ammendment was passed.

When Lord Mackay announced the amendment in the House of Lords on May 7 1996, he said: "As regards the amendment the Government are neutral."

Tony Newton repeated that form of words in the Commons on June 24: "I make it clear . . . that the Government have adopted the attitude of neutrality."

On Breakfast with Frost last October, Mr Major contradicted this, claiming he had helped "steer" the amendment through.

Mr Hamilton celebrated overturning the Bill of Rights by holding a dinner at which Lady Thatcher guest of honour.

Lord Hoffman said last night that he had no idea that the Prime Minister had instigated the change to the Bill of Rights at a private meeting with the Hamiltons.

"I had no idea that the Prime Minister had held a meeting to put forward the proposal."

"I still agree with the principle of the change of the law, but I am not happy being associated with the people who sought the change," he said. Lord Mackay emphasised last night there need be no inconsistency between the stance he took in the Lords proclaiming neutrality and the Downing Street meeting.

"Just because there are individual members of the Government more sympathetic or supportive of the clause does not alter the fact that clause was not sponsored by the Government. It was not Government policy because it was not whipped."

German soldiers have changed, said Ustinov. They have long hair and earrings, and belong to unions

Sir Peter Ustinov and Baroness Williams: Long-term Europhiles for whom the appeal of Britain is fading, as a Liberal Democrat audience heard yesterday PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL HACKETT

Sketch

Simon Hoggart

IT WAS good to see an election event addressed by two elderly people, one aged 66, the other 76. Normally old folk are as welcome at these occasions as a bogus asylum seeker with leprosy would be endorsing the Labour Party.

On the other hand, these two pensioners were Shirley Williams and Peter Ustinov. They were speaking (largely to other pensioners) in support of the Liberal Democrats at an event entitled "An Afternoon With Peter Ustinov and Shirley Williams".

It is a measure of the party's terrific organisational skills that, while Sir Peter can fill vast auditoriums around the world with people who have paid well for the privilege, the Lib Dems had contrived to leave nearly a third of the seats in the small room empty.

The first time I saw Ustinov speak was in Paris, about 20 years ago. He was introduced by Sir Christopher Soames.

"Je vous donne M Peter Ustinov," said the then ambassador. "Il est écrivain, romancier, acteur, metteur-en-scene, raconteur, directeur, et beaucoup d'autres choses aussi. On peut dire qu'il a *trop* de talent."

The French audience was bemused. Too much talent? You might as well say he had too much money, or too many beautiful mistresses.

Shirley Williams also attracts anecdotes. My favourite came from a colleague of mine who — like so many young men at Oxford — was in love with her. On one occasion he persuaded her to go punting with him. She had even promised that she wasn't double-dated, as she often was because she hated to disappoint anyone by refusing their invitation.

On the day he stood in the punt, the sun beaming down, a bottle of wine on the cushions. Finally, a mere 45 minutes late, the lovely Shirley Catlin, as she then was, could be seen running across the lawns, accompanied by a portly gentleman in black.

"Do you mind awfully us both coming?" she asked. "This is my father's butler. He's come to visit me, and I couldn't leave him indoors on such a lovely day!"

Yesterday Sir Peter was in a reflective, ruminative mood — at least as ruminative as a man can be wearing emerald green shoes.

Could Britons ever become "good" Europeans? he was asked.

"I come over here frequently, and I have the slight impression of coming back to a museum. A museum with very good exhibits, very competently labelled, but where things don't change very much."

Baroness Williams was crosser. "We have allowed ourselves to grow into a bad-tempered, snarling, resentful member state, and we are increasingly not listened to.

"The Special Relationship is dead. The United States is only interested in Britain as a bridge to Europe. We cannot afford to stand aside."

Sir Peter said how different the Germans were today.

"Britain still seems to be afraid of German militarism. Lady Thatcher certainly is, but she wouldn't approve of the form it takes.

"Soldiers with long hair and earrings, and they belong to trade unions, so that if the sergeant shouts at you too loud, there is strike action.

"German militarism used to end in wars, and British militarism ended in parades. The British would get very annoyed when the parades had to be cancelled because a war was declared."

No active, elected politician in Britain (with the possible exception of Sir Edward Heath) would dare to be as Europhiliac as these two. It was impressive, even moving, to see two elderly people care so passionately about a future of which they will not see a great deal.

Yet theirs is not the same world as ours. They move among the *bien pensants* of Europe and America, warmly welcomed and feted by other thoughtful, liberal, well-informed and handsomely paid folk.

Such people were Eurocentric almost as soon as the war was over.

Life, one suspects, looks rather different from a housing estate in Nottingham or, come to that, the slums of Lyon and Naples.

13 days to go

Good day: The three bears

Three teddy bears leapt from a taxi and seized the initiative in a new bout of animal madness, kidnapping the Tory chicken en route to a photocall with ex-minister Steven Norris.

Bad day: Kenneth Clarke

He wasn't consulted over PM's decision to offer MPs a free vote on a single currency. A dismissive Mr Major said he couldn't consult Mr Clarke or Joe Bloggs before answering every question.

Gaffe of the day

Arch Tory Euro-phobe Teddy Taylor was forced to hire a Spanish car from a firm called Eurocars in Southend. He only got a British replacement when it broke down.

Claim of the day

"The credit card could soon become the ticket past hospital reception, just as the chequebook is now the passport to the dentist." — Chris Smith, shadow health secretary

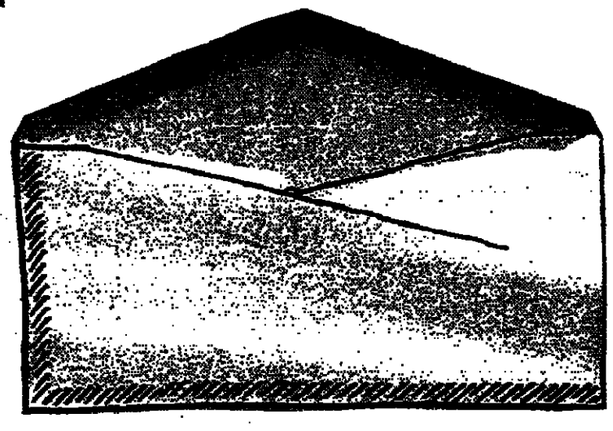
Dish of the day

Pineapple, flapjacks and cereal bars. A mutinous press corps aboard Paddy Ashdown's jet forced a switch from the monotony of Danish pastries — but no sign of John Major's favoured Marmite sandwiches and Pringles.

Sierra driver of the day

Target voter Joseph Hedges, 30, driver of a blue Sierra, reg J916 EPN, said: "I'm considering voting Conservative. Labour's policies are similar, but better the devil you know."
Andrew Culf

"I'M PAYING FOR MY MISTAKES"



IAN GREER, LOBBYIST, REOPENS 'CASH FOR QUESTIONS' ISSUE

NewStatesman
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Harold Wilson said Labour was a crusade or it was nothing. I try not to think about his assertion. The logical conclusions are too painful
Roy Hattersley

Every paper smelled blood, blue blood. The Express's exhortation 'It's time to come clean on Europe' was addressed only to Major
Roy Greenslade

Own goals make life easy for Labour

Commentary

Roy Hattersley

THE weirdest election campaign to be fought in Britain since the war has taken another bizarre turn. John Major now hopes to be re-elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on a prospectus which pledges that he will wage continual war against his own party.

On Wednesday night's election broadcast — all dishevelled hair and staring eyes — he looked like the president of a South American republic, besieged in his palace and appealing to the people to rise up and rescue him from his rebellious army. By yesterday morning, he had capitulated to the rebels. He remained agnostic about the British membership of a single European currency.

But if, three years hence, a Tory government recommended membership, he would allow antagonistic Tory backbenchers to vote against his recommendation. The new election slogan thus became "Vote for John Major and a total abdication of leadership".

On Wednesday night there was just a chance that the promise to defy the Tory Little Englanders would be attractive to floating voters. But that outcome depended on John Major convincing the people that he had the guts to maintain a sustained assault on the Redwoods and Portillos.

It would always have been difficult to obliterate the years of vacillation from the nation's mind. By allowing his spokesman to put about the idea of a free vote for his critics, he relieved the country of the need to decide if he was leading the Tory Party or the Tory Party was leading him.

Anyway, I do not recall the Tories — or the newspapers which supported them — congratulating Harold Wilson when he was at loggerheads with Labour over unilateral disarmament, or Jim Callaghan when he ignored his party conference resolution on public expenditure. The popular slogan of the day was, "If they can't agree amongst themselves, how can they hope to govern the country?"

It was a fair question. Now it has become the central issue of this dismal campaign — dismal because Europe is the only policy which is ever seriously discussed. Even that, as Labour is right to say, has become an argument about the Prime Minister's competence rather than the merits of the single currency.

But the Opposition must take its share of blame for downgrading the quality of the debate. We hear a great deal about the Tories' objections to the Maastricht social chapter. When is somebody going to set out its benefits? At yesterday morning's press conference, Tony Blair simply said that both major parties agreed about the way we should approach the prospects of monetary union, but only the Labour Party could deliver.

As if to symbolise the similarities, John Major — begging support for his "wait and see" policy on the single currency — pleaded "not to be sent naked into the conference chamber".

Did he realise that the strange image was originally invented by Aneurin Bevan when he argued, at a Labour Party conference, against nuclear disarmament. Next week the Prime Minister may well promise "to fight and fight and fight again to save the party we love". It will not do him any good. Everybody knows that he will retreat at the first whiff of anti-European grapeshot.

Labour cannot be blamed for rejoicing at the Tories' incompetence. But party spokesmen claim to be furious about their inability to dominate the news with a positive agenda. When, I wonder, did a football team last complain about its opponents scoring regular own goals?

It ought to be (and probably is) a matter of relief that, since the front pages are filled with stories of Conservative rebellion, there is no room for the meticulous examination of some of Labour's policies.

This week, the party again announced that its education reforms were concerned "not with structures but with standards". Anyone who can tell the difference between a blackboard and a desktop computer knows that the two issues cannot be separated.

Whilst television interviewers wrangle with John Horam about the sub-text of his election leaflets, there is no time to examine subjects which, in a decent campaign, would dominate the media.

Yesterday my heart leapt up when I beheld Tony Blair sternly telling the assembled journalists at Labour's press conference that, important though Europe was, there were other items on the campaign agenda.

The one on which he hoped the day's attention would be concentrated was the health service and Labour's promise to end the internal market and recreate a unified (as distinct from two-tier) system of medical care.

If, at any time during the last 20 years, Labour had accused the Tories of creating a private enclave within the public health service, the vibrations of outrage would have rattled on for days. Now a doctor can appear on the Today programme to announce that fundholding GPs get priority on hospital waiting lists and the injustice is accepted with a resigned shrug. The drift of politics towards the soggy centre has emasculated the political debate.

So all that we are left with are questions of personality. That is, in the short term, fine for the Labour Party, for Tony Blair is so obviously better leadership material than John Major. But it does mean that his victory will not herald any sort of transformation of British society. Labour is fighting an accountants' war.

More than 30 years ago Harold Wilson said that the party was a crusade or it was nothing. I try not think about his assertion. The logical conclusions are too painful.

Looking forward . . . Tony Blair in his battlebus en route to Stanstead airport for a flight to Edinburgh, where he addressed last night's Labour election rally PHOTOGRAPH: MARTIN ARGLES

Sowing the seeds of rebellion

Media watch: The press

Roy Greenslade

WHO put Europe on the election agenda? One rogue Tory? The Euro-sceptic collective? The Daily Mail? Or was it bound to happen anyway? The last is undoubtedly the truth, but there is some merit in the Mail's claim that it started the ball rolling.

On Monday, the paper carried an enthusiastic report about 200 Tory MPs taking a similar anti-single currency stance to Food Minister Angela Browning. Below it was a commentary by Simon Heffer headlined "Waking up to the Euro-nightmare."

Other papers, including the impeccably Euro-sceptic Daily Telegraph, were still mulling over the state of Tony Blair's campaign, the row over John Prescott's supposed off-the-record remarks and Mo Mowlam's treatment for a brain tumour.

So distant did Europe appear that the Independent leader lamented: "It is extraordinary. The issue that tore the latter months of the Major premiership to shreds, the issue that since 1975 has turned Labour inside out — and, so far, barely a campaign whisper." Now there is a paper with its finger on the pulse.

The Times, by contrast, was sure something would happen soon. It predicted: "Europe, which politicians from all sides probably wanted to suppress, will take its proper prominence."

The Sun, which now combines New Labourist enthusiasm with anti-European fanaticism, also pleaded for the debate. "We're entitled to know where our politicians stand on Europe."

The next day, the Mail, frustrated by the failure of the parties to raise the European spectre but sensing that the Tory split offered the perfect opportunity, devoted its front page to the topic. "The Battle For Britain" said a headline superimposed over a picture of Parliament and a leader couched in tablet-of-stone style. "There is a deafening silence at the heart of this election and its name is Europe."

Inside there was much more. Dame Angela Rumbold's opposition to the single currency was joyfully headlined "Tory chief joins Euro-sceptic chorus". Another page displayed a scroll of honour naming 40 Tories, next to pictures of 36 more "standing up to be counted over Europe."

This propagandist crusade to make Europe the key electoral division between the parties clearly came from editor Paul Dacre's heart. It is the reason his paper could never follow the Sun by supporting Blair. "Nothing less is at stake than the freedom of Britain as a self-governing nation," said his leader.

Again, the rest of the press was unconvinced about the growing Tory revolt on single currency being one of the — if not the — campaign's defining moment. The fishing quota story dominated headlines, along with Blair's pledge to use the EU veto if necessary, but there was no linkage between that row and the rebel Tories.

Next day it all changed. The Mail's pro-active surveying of Tory candidates — asking each of them about their views on greater integration with Europe — paid off. Two junior ministers, "broke ranks". Its front page "Europe: The Great Revolt" was echoed by every other paper from the Financial Times ("Tory crisis over Euro-sceptic rebels") to the Mirror ("Stuff EU Major").

The Daily Telegraph, which also carried out a survey among Tory candidates, found widespread opposition to Europe. Rarely has the opening sentence of a Telegraph splash been truer: "John Major's attempt to stem the growing mood of Euro-scepticism sweeping through Tory ranks suffered its biggest setback . . ."

Every paper smelled blood, blue blood. The Daily Express's front page exhortation "It's time to come clean on Europe" was addressed only to Major.

The Times's leader excoriated the prime minister: "It is an unhappy commentary on Mr Major's faith in the durability and credibility of a wait-and-see policy that he has had it so derisively flouted by his troops."

Yesterday saw a significant change of mood by the Mail. Having praised Tories who defied Major, the paper suggested that the Tory leader had "bowed to overwhelming party pressure" by offering a "dramatic personal pledge" in declaring: 'I will not take Britain into a single currency. Only the British nation can do that."

This quote was taken from Major's hastily rearranged party political broadcast which the Mail had the gall to call "a bravura performance".

The reason for this sudden affection for Major became clear. "On Europe, at least, clear blue water is at last opening up between the main parties."

The Telegraph took a similar line in its leader. (Both it and the Mail accused Labour of Stalinist tactics to suppress dissent). But the front page headlines in virtually every paper reflected a simpler story. Two referred to it as Major's gamble (FT and Telegraph); two likened it to an internal Tory war (Independent and Guardian); the Times's "Don't bind my hands" captured the pleading tone; and the Express's asked: "Are we any the wiser?"

And the Sun? It carried an "exclusive by Tony Blair" headlined "My love for £" and a leader which marks just how far it has moved from its former German-bashing mates, the Mail and Telegraph. It praised Blair's recognition "that the single currency cannot be judged purely on economic terms . . . Our sovereignty, heritage and way of life matter, too."

So it urged readers to get their candidates to spell out their position on Europe and vote accordingly. The difference between 1992 and 1997 could not be more obvious. Five years ago the Sun would have been asking those questions itself on behalf of its readers.

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Daily Mail

This man is an illegal immigrant with AIDS, syphilis and TB. So far he has cost you £250,000

JILL DANDO: The truth about me, love and that game warden

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THE BATTLE FOR BRITAIN

DAILY MAIL COMMENT

The crusade to make Europe the key electoral division between the parties came from editor Paul Dacre's heart. It is the reason his paper could never support Blair. 'Nothing less is at stake than the freedom of Britain as a self-governing nation,' said his leader comment

Left: the front page of Tuesday's Daily Mail, devoted to Europe

Debate nobody wants

Issues of age hit old taboo: spending

The elderly

THE parties would rather sidestep the issue of the elderly in this election because it forces them to confront one of the biggest taboos of the moment — no, not death, but spending money.

We have more elderly people than ever before in this country. There are 10.6 million pensioners and most are short of cash. Two thirds of pensioner households are below the threshold for income tax. The state pension was aligned with prices and the link broken with incomes in the early years of the Thatcher government. The purchasing power of the pension has effectively not risen since 1980.

Age Concern argues that to have a decent but modest lifestyle, a pensioner needs at least £125 a week. The basic state pension is £62.45 for a single person and just £99.80 for a couple where the woman has not worked. Pensioners on that sort of money are entitled to income support, but it increases the single person income by only £6.35 (ages 60-74). And because of a perceived stigma attached, perhaps a million elderly people who qualify do not claim it.

However, the state cannot afford the spiralling cost of pensions at the existing level, let alone an increase. The cradle to the grave deal is off, but the personal, private options are not fully worked out. The Conservatives launched a consultative document on the future Basic Pension Plus before the election was called — but it will not affect anyone over the age of 20. Labour has proposed a Royal Commission, which some say is a means of stalling for time.

Why they should be talking about it

The grey vote — a quarter of the electorate — is there for the taking. No longer are the elderly, the majority of them women, diehard Tories. A recent survey suggested one third of the over-55s might change their vote in this election.

If the politicians gloss over pensions and the long-term care of the elderly — 40,000 are having to sell their homes each year to pay for residential care — they can focus on general health service or education issues, in which older people express a keen interest.

What could be done?

A million and one things would help, but Mervyn Kohler of Help the Aged says our political leaders have failed to keep up with the changes in society.

Look at the health service, he says — the focus of the early days on scarlet fever and measles has switched to Alzheimer's and strokes.

The elderly need good housing, better public or community transport, and better health and social care services. An imaginative government could look into subsidising their heating bills to keep them healthy and save money for the NHS and offer other benefits like free eye tests and even new technology for the housebound, to include alarm systems and push-button opening of doors and curtains, not to mention the Internet.

Sarah Boseley

Why I'm voting Tory

Look at Labour's small print

Stanley Kalms

I AM a Conservative voter and will be voting for them again this time. During my youth I may have wandered down some of the different paths of the political system, but I have been consistently persuaded that Margaret Thatcher had lots of serious political theories that were worth pursuing.

Tory policies have been consistent and John Major has been a very good Prime Minister. It has been a difficult period because of the European question and there is division within the political parties and within the country. But he has steered a straight and sensible course between his dislike of some of the procedure, and his need to be at the negotiating table.

Blair is much more ambivalent and less certain of his views. You cannot vote for him on a Europe ticket.

There is no doubt that within Labour there is still a large number of members who do not share his outlook. I am concerned about those who have avowed policies which are totally contrary to that which he is stating. Those in business have to live with whichever government is in power. But before the Government changes it has to be said that this country has had a remarkably good run for 18 years and it has been in experienced hands.

If you are going to change the management you should have a good look at the small print and study the details. I have not seen enough details to be convinced that we should change it. The Labour Party are talking about enormous cost and I have not seen where the revenue will be coming from.

Of course one would like to see changes but there are young men coming in all the time. I am sure there will be a major Cabinet reshape and we will get fresh blood in there.

I think the outcome of the election will be touch-and-go. I still believe in the case for a Conservative government with their market economy policies.

Sir Stanley Kalms is chairman of Dixons. Interview by Kate Watson-Smyth

I see a lot of places which could have got European grants. There are factories that have never seen a politician before
Winnie Ewing

Labour and the Lib Dems are nothing less than traitors creating diversions and trouble in a peaceful land'
J W 'Jim' Finlay

The SNP's Alasdair Morgan canvassing at the fountain in St John's Town of Dalry

Big country's Lang lazy days

Matthew Engel in Galloway, where the main debate takes place in the local paper
Illustrations: **Paul Cox**

IN THE constituency with the most beautiful place-names in Britain, a tremendous political battle is going on. On the left: Olivia "Bunty" Lockerbie of St John's Town of Dalry, widow, retired schoolteacher, Guardian reader, Welsh woman and passionate Scottish Nationalist ("It's not a party for Scots, it's for people in Scotland").

On the right: J W "Jim" Finlay of Gatehouse of Fleet, farmer, army veteran (as he reminds people rather too often), devoted Tory, and maker of fine ice cream, including his special whisky, honey and oatmeal flavour. Even Bunty says it's brilliant.

In Clatteringshaws and Clachaneasy, Drummockloch and Haugh of Urr, people lap up the rapier-thrusts of their argument and the quotes they hurl at one another. This is how elections used to be. Unfortunately, neither Bunty nor Jim is standing for Parliament or anything else. They fight each other only in the letters pages of the Galloway News.

The main contenders for the parliamentary seat of Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, covering a vast acreage of south-west Scotland, are, in contrast, determinedly sober-suited, competent, cautious, on-message and grey. One of them happens to be a Cabinet Minister: Ian Lang, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who is defending a majority of 2,668 against Alasdair Morgan, national secretary of the SNP.

This is a close and unpredictable contest: after Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth, Mr Lang may be the most vulnerable of all the Cabinet on May 1. But if it is exciting, Galloway and Upper Nithsdale does not seem to have noticed.

The constituency, sixth biggest in the land, covers the distance from London to Bath. It is almost a secret corner of the kingdom, little-known for anything except that young Lochinvar came out of this part of the west, and the town of Newton Stewart is alleged to have more pubs per head than anywhere else in Britain, though they count the hotels and golf club, which sounds like cheating.

The countryside, however, is achingly beautiful. The mountains are not as high as further north, but lovely, misty vistas — like the Cloudy Bay wine labels — open up all the time. There are far more toothbrush-trees than electors. And the midges are every bit as fierce as in the Highlands. In some of the tiny urban pockets, unemployment is very bad indeed; the rural poor are quiet and long-suffering but undeniable.

Big names have been coming to see the Galloway voters, but they haven't been all that successful, partly because it is so impossible to cover the terrain. Winnie Ewing, SNP matriarch, MEP for the Highlands and Islands and dead-cert for Queen Mum of an independent Scotland, spent two days there this week. One eyewitness swore that she began waving to hedges and telegraph poles on the off-chance that a voter was concealed there.

In Newton Stewart she addressed an evening meeting with an attendance — discounting platform and entourage — of 11, including a little girl sucking her thumb. Possibly everyone else was in one of the pubs.

The following day Michael Heseltine arrived. He came down in a big bird from the sky in Castle Douglas like Big White Carstairs inspecting some remote part of Africa. Mr Lang greeted him as if he were the earnest young district administrator anxious to show that his natives were friendly.

Mr Heseltine could not have got a very clear opinion one way or the other. He spent an hour and 40 minutes in Galloway, of which 55 minutes was spent having lunch in the Imperial Hotel. Much of the rest of the time, 9 per cent of the Cabinet (i.e. the two of them) were dressed in mob caps and plastic coats, looking ridiculous for pictorial purposes, wandering round a bakery saying things like: "What's in here, currants?"

Local TV interviewers and Conservative workers aside, I estimate Mr Heseltine spoke to four bakery workers, one lollipop lady, a garage owner, one man painting his front door and another reading a paper in the cocktail bar of the Imperial Hotel. He may also have said "Soup, please" to a waitress. There is a purpose to all this, but I'm not sure anyone can remember what it is.

The Galloway election has a subtext, which is that Mr Lang has been a bad constituency MP. He does not live there and is alleged to have done little for the area, despite his high office. He is unfavourably compared to Sir Hector Monro — "good old Hector" — now retiring from the next-door seat in Dumfries, and whose 7,000 majority is supposed to have been bolstered with a huge personal vote, and to Michael Forsyth who has been a much bonnier and high-profile Scottish Secretary than Mr Lang was. This perception is not just held by his political opponents, though they are the ones articulating, and probably over-stating it.

"Lang's quite a personable, witty guy," says Winnie Ewing. "But he's lazy. Ask his civil servants. And he's not got Scotland in his heart, the way George Younger had and even I think Michael Forsyth has.

"As I go round the constituency I can see a lot of places which I think could have got European grants and haven't. There are factories I've been to that have never seen a politician before. There's not a factory in my seat that I haven't visited, and I've got the biggest constituency in Europe."

One feels a bit sorry for Mr Lang. He could have spent 18 years combing an area this size, never doing anything at Westminster, and still people would say they had never seen him. But he does come over as a touch complacent.

Michael Heseltine interviewed by Border Television during his short walkabout after lunch at the Imperial Hotel, Castle Douglas

Michael Heseltine arrived in a big bird like Big White Carstairs inspecting some remote part of Africa. Mr Lang greeted him as if he were the earnest young district administrator anxious to show that his natives were friendly

"The SNP have got nothing else to say except to attack me personally," he said. "I'm getting a very warm personal reception everywhere I go. We're enjoying good weather. The farmers have had good lambing and their grants have been paid out. The mood is steady and relaxed and my support is solid."

Mr Lang was a scriptwriter for That Was The Week That Was in the fin-de-Macmillan period of 1963, and thus knows something about how long-running governments can turn towards decadence and smugness. He actually sounded rather like Harold Wilson, fighting his deservedly unsuccessful isn't-it-nice-and-sunny election of 1970.

The Heseltine-Lang show did at least keep to time. Mrs Ewing was due to see Bunty Lockerbie and the rest of the SNP supporters in Dalry at 4pm precisely. She arrived at three minutes past five. The SNP seem to regard punctuality as one of those Saxon impositions that can be shrugged off after independence. One man had been waiting for her in the Clachan Arms since midday, with predictable consequences.

To win, the SNP are more dependent on squeezing Labour and Liberal votes than on the odd Dalry drunk. In particular, they have to hope that most Labour voters here are too remote to know that their activists hate the SNP with that poisonous loathing which can only come from having a broadly similar outlook on the world.

Messrs Lang and Morgan will do their frantic rounds for the next fortnight. I doubt if either will have much impact. In the meantime, the Bunty and Jim Show goes on far more entertainingly. In his latest missive, Mr Finlay said he was surprised to find Alex Salmond, the SNP leader quite normal "in contrast to the local colourful characters of that persuasion."

Then he turned his fire on Labour and the Lib Dems: "a misguided rabble ... nothing less than traitors creating diversions and trouble in a peaceful land. These men and the SNP have been nowhere and seen nothing." The old soldier then gave his audience their regular helping of Burns, this time on the Battle of Killiecrankie.

*If ye had been where I had been ye wadna be sae cantie**
O! If ye had seen what I had seen...
...The Conservative and Unionist Party will do nothing to risk the Union or sacrifice sovereignty to Europe.

Mrs Lockerbie said her piece about Ian Lang a few weeks ago. "I wrote and asked if anyone can tell me one person who Mr Lang had helped. A lady from Crocket Ford rang me and said he helped get her mother into a nursing home. And that was it, the only comment." Today she returns fire on her adversary. "Mr Finlay's dire warnings of bloodshed and violence just don't make sense and to call his fellow Scots 'traitors' is unforgivable."

She quotes Hamish Henderson's Freedom Come All Ye:

So come all ye at hame wi' freedom
*Never held** what our hoodies*** croak for doom*
... It's up to every one of you now. Help Alasdair Morgan and the SNP to give Galloway back its self-respect and hope.

Lack of self-respect, it seems to me, includes apathy and cynicism about the democratic process. I never saw an election poster in Galloway. Britain is a democracy that seems to have gone beyond maturity, beyond even apathy and cynicism into something close to degeneracy. It is not entirely the politicians' fault.

But at least two people out there are still scrapping with vigour, fervour and a real commitment to fundamental beliefs. When Bunty and Jim require spin doctors to say what they really mean then we will know the nation is truly finished. Whether that nation is still the UK or an independent Scotland.

**cantie — cheerful*
***held — mind*
****hoodies — crows, the harbingers of death*

Castle Douglas high street looking towards the old town hall clock

The constituency, sixth biggest in the land, covers the distance from London to Bath. The countryside is achingly beautiful. It is a secret corner of the kingdom, little-known for anything except that young Lochinvar came out of this part of the west

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A total embarrassment

Mr Netanyahu should do the mature thing and go

FROM TEL AVIV to Washington via Gaza, there is a huge audience hoping against hope that Binyamin Netanyahu may, as a result of Israel's corruption scandal, have finally taken a fatal tumble. The usual pragmatic attitude towards democratically elected incumbent prime ministers does not apply in the case of "Bibi". He has been a disaster inflicted upon Israel by the unhappy consequences of an assassin's bullet — having first contributed to the climate of hatred which killed Yitzhak Rabin by making common cause with right-wing thugs and extremists. He has brought the peace process to the edge of breakdown by a combination of tardy concessions and senseless provocations which give ammunition to the enemies of peace while baffling and confusing his own friends. A former government spokesman who learnt his trade only too well, he has never been able to distinguish between slick speech and sound persuasion. As Mr Rabin's widow said last week, Mr Netanyahu has made every possible mistake, but his biggest one is the failure to understand that Israel can afford to be "more generous and more patient."

So will the tawdry Bar-On affair relieve everyone of what has become a vast embarrassment? They should be so lucky — on the evidence of Mr Netanyahu's defiant statement yesterday. The cheers of his activists who hailed him King of Israel must make all moderate Israelis cringe. The case has generated enough material, according to the police investigation, "to indict the prime minister on charges of fraud and breach of trust." A man of lesser ambition or greater sensitivity would step down whether or not he is actually indicted. It appears there is even stronger evidence against two of his closest associates. Justice Minister Tzahi Hanegbi was Bibi's right-hand man before the election. He is on record as proposing to use assault helicopters to strafe Hamas funerals, and to close Palestinian areas whenever necessary so strictly that "not even a pregnant woman or a child who needs chemotherapy" can go in or out. He has described settlement building as a strategy to "project force" against the Arabs. The other associate threatened with indictment is Mr Netanyahu's chief of staff Avigdor Lieberman — who engineered his leadership of the Likud party. Last month Mr Netanyahu's lawyer sought to defend his client by blaming Mr Hanegbi: the justice minister may still try to exculpate himself by implicating Mr Netanyahu. But in the end, all of those involved belong to the same unlovely gang.

Members of the coalition cabinet have already complained that Mr Netanyahu rushed their decision to confirm the appointment of Roni Bar-On, an unremarkable criminal lawyer, as attorney general, while Mr Hanegbi misrepresented his qualifications. Like so many of the manoeuvres associated with Mr Netanyahu's administration, the ruse was only too transparent: to appoint an attorney general who would look leniently on charges against Arye Deri, leader of the Shas Party whose votes prop up the coalition. All the parties, both in and out of office, now have to do some hard calculations on the political fall-out. Labour can hardly consent to join a national unity government with Likud if Mr Netanyahu remains, even though this might help save the peace process. The coalition partners have to balance remaining in a discredited government against the likelihood of doing less well in a new election than a year ago. Whatever decision is taken by the law officers on whether to indict Mr Netanyahu, he could save everyone a lot of trouble now — but he will need to show a maturity which has so far escaped him.

Dealing with the killing weeds

Tobacco promotion should be banned as well as advertising

TWO IMPORTANT steps to reduce the greatest single cause of premature death were made yesterday: the Advocate-General's opinion in the European Court of Justice should block the loophole through which much cheaper cigarettes are being imported into Britain from European countries where tobacco tax rates are up to 40 per cent lower; and reports from America suggesting the two biggest cigarette companies there are about to follow in the footsteps of the much smaller Liggett group and sign a deal which would set aside a phenomenal £188 billion to compensate victims of smoking-related diseases over 25 years. One measure of the wealth of the tobacco barons is the 11 point jump in the share price of British American Tobacco (BAT) when news of the American deal first broke. Now Britain is on the verge of making a much belated further step in health promotion: a ban on tobacco advertising. It has long been resisted by the Conservatives, but both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties wholeheartedly support the move. Roll on the start of the new government.

Any industry whose product kills 300 of its own customers every day will have one over-riding concern: recruiting another 300 more consumers a day to ensure its survival. Hence the resistance to an advertising ban, particularly a ban which would halt the cigarette companies from recruiting young smokers. The various voluntary restrictions on advertising and promotion have been shown to be a sham. For every £100 which the industry purports to spend on dissuading children from taking up the habit, it spends another £10,000 insidiously promoting its products of death. By the age of 15, about 20 per cent of teenagers are smoking. By the time they become young adults (20 to 24) almost 40 per cent are smoking. Three out of four began the habit before 18. Far from the proportion of young smokers shrinking — as the Government planned in its Health of the Nation strategy — the numbers are rising. Yet it was Margaret Thatcher, who went from Prime Minister to a £500,000-a-year consultancy with the American cigarette company, Philip Morris, who declared in Downing Street that for every 1,000 young people then alive, six would die in road accidents but 250 would be killed prematurely through tobacco. Since then it has got worse.

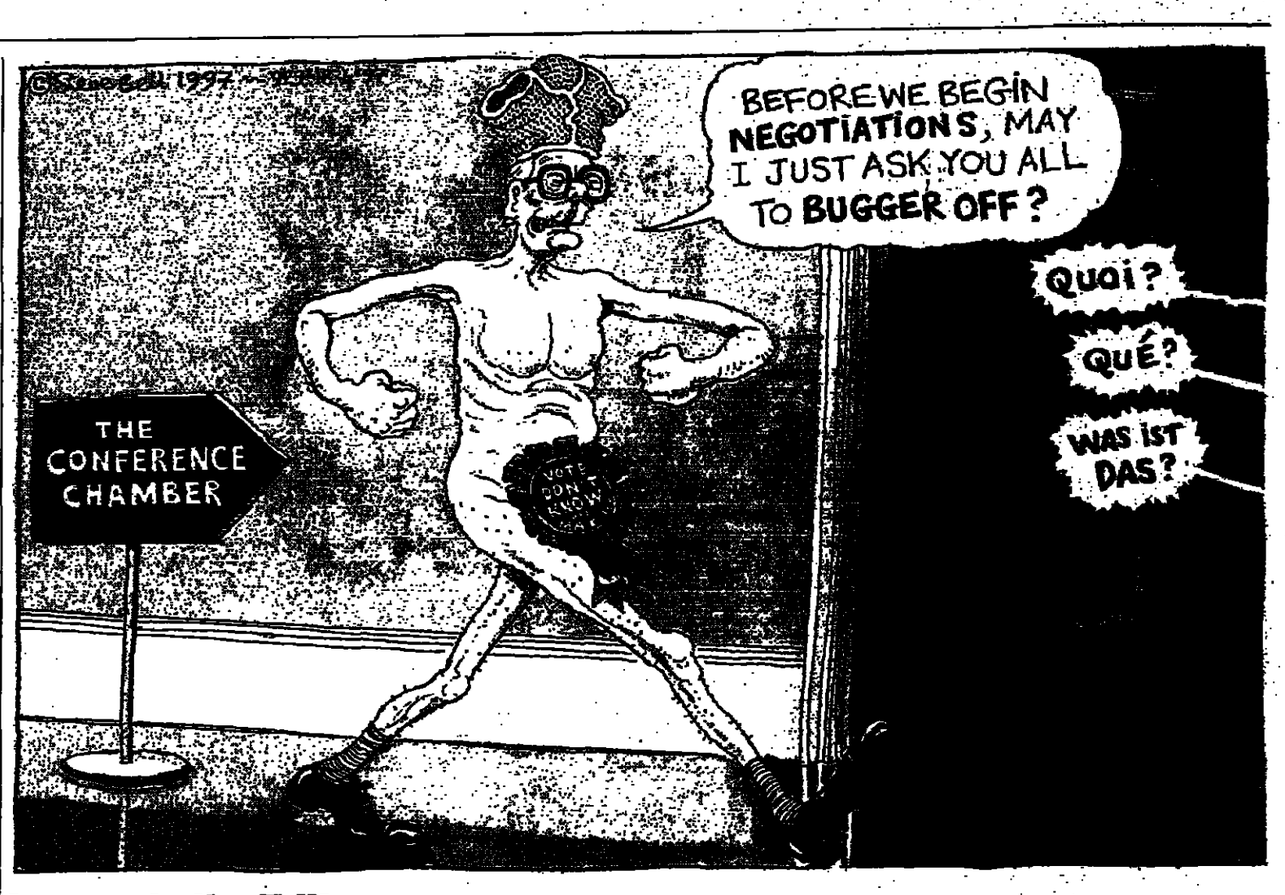
Over £70 million is spent a year by the tobacco industry on direct advertising. Where advertising bans have been introduced — Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Finland and France — a drop in consumption has followed, particularly among young people. But Labour will need to go one step further: banning the even more insidious £10 million tobacco promotion budget. Labour wants to talk to sports and arts bodies involved, but Australians have already found a solution: a tobacco tax to produce an equivalent sum. It works there; it would work equally well here.

How to police Cyberspace

It is a global problem and it needs a global solution

THE LIBERTARIAN culture at the heart of the Internet is under attack from both sides of the Atlantic. The German head of CompuServe (a leading service provider) has been charged with disseminating pornography in a test of how far the authorities can police pornography in Cyberspace. It's like BT or Mercury being charged for carrying obscene phone calls. In America the Supreme Court is considering whether to uphold the draconian provisions of the Communications Decency Act which aims to prevent indecent material reaching children but which could infringe the free speech which Netizens regard as sacrosanct.

Potentially, the Internet is the biggest enabling device ever devised offering millions of people access to a gigantic store of information and allowing them to send text, music and pictures across the world in fractions of a second. But it also enables paedophiles and other perverts to exchange their obscenities in a global market which children can access or stumble across. Something must be done: but that doesn't justify the German or the US approach. It is absurd to pass a law, as in the US, so all-embracing that adults or service providers downloading the text of Ulysses could be open to prosecution. And charging the service provider (who can't always know what is being sent down the wires) isn't the answer either. This problem was created by the global reach of new technology and that is how it must be solved. A German or US court doesn't have power beyond its own frontiers. There must be a global policeman — the digital equivalent of the UN or the IMF — using the latest techniques (including redundant CIA encryption experts?) to hunt down paedophiles and others, leaving the Net itself to fulfil its almost unlimited potential to educate and entertain.



Letters to the Editor

The matter of Mandelson

CATHERINE Bennett nearly convinces me in her heartfelt polemic on why she can't vote Labour no more (Dog takes the biscuit, April 16), but we all have different breaking points. And there is a general and a specific difficulty. The general lies in the nature of politics. I think of the ex-communist, the poet C Day Lewis, on Home Guard duty in 1940: "No time is this for honest verse, Defending the bad against far worse."

The specific difficulty could arise from where she votes. A tactical vote for the Lib-Dems (or up here the SNP) is a good idea to keep the "far worse" out, but if it split the vote against the Tories it would be solopsistic, moralistic self-indulgence etc.

Breaking points differ. The poet e e cummings once had Olaf, the conscientious objector, say: "There is some shit I cannot eat." My breaking point could be the bulldog. Bully that an English patriotic symbol can be retrieved from Tory entrapment (like Blake's Jerusalem), but I'm off when Tony Blair begins to talk like Thatcher of "Winston".
Bernard Crick.
8a Bellevue Terrace,
Edinburgh EH7 4DT.

THE one person who single-handedly could lose this election for Labour is Peter Mandelson. I joined Labour at about the time Tony Blair became leader; I'm considering abandoning Labour exactly because of the Mandeavellian tendencies of those in charge of Labour's campaign, who clearly think that the electorate are half-wits.

I felt physically sick when I saw the bulldog being paraded — for Labour, for God's sake. Surely that image went out 50 years ago. Mandelson and his lot are living in a dream world, despite all the focus groups. How do we get the Tories out without having to suffer the jackboot of Peter M and his cronies for the next five years?
Adam Thomson.
50 rue de la Pacification,
1000 Brussels.

PETER Mandelson says New Labour "has no ideological attachment to nationalisation and public ownership". Don't be coy, Peter, New Labour has no ideological attachment to *anything*. If a policy is perceived as meeting favour with middle-class Middle England, New Labour adopts it, irrespective of whether it is the opposite of a policy adopted the day before, let alone one that has stood for 50 years. By kowtowing to big business and pandering to the narrow-minded, self-preserving prejudices of the middle classes, Tony Blair has deserted the disadvantaged, the very people the Labour Party was founded to help.

I have voted for Labour since 1979, believing in a fair society for all, just as the party once did, but not this time. I don't believe in the party any longer, and voting just to get the Tories out doesn't fill me with any enthusiasm.
Martin Boyle.
42 Hart Road,
Erdington,
Birmingham B24 9ES.

I HAVE managed to avoid Mandelson, along with a great deal of the current Labour rubbish. But Catherine Bennett is right to focus on one personality, as he most represents — and possibly orchestrates — the utterly debased nature of a once vigorous party's utterances. And to mix with such bad company as Mandelson does require a hideous insensitivity. Labour could hardly be more compromised.
Jane Malleson.
39a Hamilton Terrace,
London NW8 9RG.

SO Catherine Bennett won't be voting Labour. She has taken the right decision but for the wrong reason: disapproval of Peter Mandelson and his contempt for the electorate. Mr Mandelson's "obvious conviction that voters are thick" is fully justified. No one with any degree of intelligence would be taken in by the ritual song-and-dance acts of the political parties.
Philip Lloyd Lewis.
57f Mallard Road,
Bournemouth BH8 9PJ.

What are we offering the elderly in place of fear?

YOUR Leader (Coming to terms with longevity, April 16), while urging that "facts should be faced", fails to acknowledge a number of issues. We have, as a society, actively encouraged and indeed celebrated the longer life now enjoyed by an increasing number of people.

To decide suddenly that steps should be taken to eliminate those who, by reasons of failing health, become a cost to the state revives memories of another ideology which many of those same people gave several years of their lives to destroy. The fact is not that we "cannot afford" the care of this and other need groups, but that payment for such care is inimical to current beliefs on wealth distribution. Health managers already use the concept of the QALY (Quality Adjusted Life Years) to assess cost and make treatment decisions, and rationing does take place — resulting in death in some instances.

The fact that some older people have been reduced into the belief that such sacrifice is necessary in order "to give someone else a chance" should not be used as justification for such discrimination.

"Communal need and private greed are in constant war with each other," said Aneurin Bevan at the birth of the NHS in his book, In Place of Fear. Perhaps that is the fact which we should really be facing.
Don W Steele.
Executive director,
Association of Retired People.
Greencoat House,
Francis Street,
London SW1P 1DZ.

YOUR Leader draws attention to the inescapable fact that, although we are living longer, the age at which health begins to deteriorate has not increased. The implications for public policy are profound. With a greater number of elderly people living longer and needing care, more money must be found to provide for that care.

There is only one firm foundation for the future of long-term care — adequate funding. We need an open debate about how resources can be harnessed, but we cannot have better services, or cater for an increasingly elderly — and frail — population, without spending more. The political parties have so far failed to confront this central issue to avoid making spending commitments.

The election campaign gives the parties an ideal opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to guaranteeing funding for, and access to, care for all older people. We urge the political parties not to neglect the quarter of the electorate who are pensioners.
Paul Seymour.
Chairman,
Continuing Care Conference.
12 Little College Street,
London SW1P 3SH.

I TAKE issue with the contradiction at the centre of your argument. Yes, longevity is good; but no, do not expect a sustained quality of life. You cite the old maxim of old people "having had a good innings". Surely that is the whole point of the health exercise? If we cannot afford old age, perhaps the utilitarian answer is to revert back to the 19th century and high morbidity? We *can* afford it, but only if there is a will to change. That is the big question facing all European countries in the next century.
Val Stevens.
263 Ryebank Road,
Manchester M21 9LZ.

MAUREEN Freely's repetition (Famous five, April 8) of the "terror of getting old" is just confirmation of society's stereotype of old people being useless and unimportant.

Yes, there are inevitable losses and disadvantages as we get old — reduced income and a slowing down of faculties for some.

But there are wonderful advantages too. To have the freedom to pursue those ambitions for which there was no time in a working life; to be free of the *need* to seduce while enjoying continued sexuality; to be beyond the daily hands-on trials of one's offspring yet relishing their adult development; to have the opportunity to pursue new interests; to be at a stage when one can accept and live with one's foibles and yet acknowledge one's own skills and experience; to have time to read all those books that line the shelves unread.

Growing old also allows the taking of risks previously feared — after all, we know we won't die young.
Shirley Meredeen (aged 66¾).
Growing Old
Disgracefully Network.
Flat 3,
4 Highbury Place,
London N5 1QZ.

Please include a full postal address, even on e-mailed letters, and a daytime telephone number

A poor report

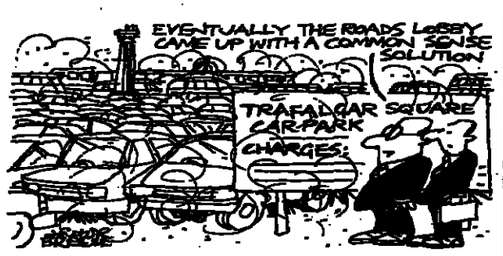
WHILE not wishing to spoil compliments from such unexpected quarters as George Walden (Election commentary, April 16), I must disagree with him that I have just "begun facing up to fundamentals: the erroneous philosophies that have dominated our state schools for decades". I challenged such erroneous philosophies from my earliest days as a young teacher-union representative in ILEA in the early 1970s.

I publicly opposed "trendy" methods, politicians trying to impose mixed-ability methods upon teachers and bungled reorganisations of schools. I tried calling attention to many schools which were "failing". I opposed the widespread attempts to turn teachers into social workers.

Few Labour or Conservative politicians paid any attention at the time. So I feel more than a little miffed when I am expected to listen to lectures from politicians on what went wrong. That is also why I am entitled to a little wry smile when people such as Chris Woodhead lecture on the errors of certain teaching methods which they advocated in their youth as they climbed the greasy promotion pole.

George Walden is, however, quite correct in alluding to the fact that I am trying to get teachers to relax a little and consider carefully Chris Woodhead's words. Something must be wrong for teachers and the Chief Inspector to be in such open hostility when his latest Annual Report is 95 per cent complimentary about their performance.

However, I do not excuse Chris Woodhead from his share of the blame. The political and inaccurate spin he put upon his own class-size report, together with the media frenzy his guesstimate of 16,000 incompetent teachers provoked, at least partly explain the hostility. The interest of the Education Service require that the hostility be broken down.
Nigel de Gruchy.
General Secretary, NASUWT.
5 King Street,
London WC2E 8HN.



Walking back to happiness

SIR Norman Foster's proposals for Trafalgar Square and its surroundings should be welcomed as a bold, imaginative vision of how the centre of one of the world's great cities could be managed for people rather than motorised traffic. Your headline's claim, however, that "Square routes would reclaim London for pedestrians" (April 17), is a trifle exaggerated. Anyone who knows London will know that it, like most of Britain's other towns and cities, is a nightmare for pedestrians.

People travelling on foot trip over poorly maintained pavements, have to skirt round cars parked on the pavement, are hemmed in by railings, forced into smelly subways or over footbridges, or have to dash across busy roads when the lights briefly change in their favour.

Recent policy papers, such as the Government's consultation paper on a national walking strategy and the London Planning Advisory Committee's draft walking strategy for London, are welcome. But we will not make walking more attractive unless we tackle the appalling quality of the facilities and space provided for pedestrians.
Ben Plowden.
Director,
The Pedestrians Association.
126 Aldersgate Street,
London EC1A 4JQ.

Policing, a very dirty business

I HAVE absolutely no brief from anyone to respond to Mike Bennett, Chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation (Letters, April 12), and do so only out of a growing sense of dismay at this latest display of contemptuous arrogance for the views of his senior colleagues.

The reference to Chief Constable Charles Pollard as being "typical of today's breed of senior officer who are admitting the criminals' philosophy — let us have our own way or else" is not only deliberately insulting but a disgraceful distortion. It undermines the hard work and dedication of senior officers all over the country, including the Metropolitan Police — many of whom will be among the ranks which Mr Bennett purports to represent.

Has he become so self-satisfied and opinionated that he has forgotten that even "today's breed of senior officer" began life as constables on the streets just as he did? How sad that he has become so blinded by the need to try and grab a headline and a few cheers from a minority of people who will appreciate the gratuitously offensive personal attacks which have become his public trademark.

If he spent a little less time playing to the gallery, and a little more on serious issues, his views would have much greater value, and he might recognise the incredible richness and diversity of policing.

No doubt I have now risen higher on his list of chief constables to receive some personal abuse before long.
D W Aldous.
Chief Constable, Dorset Police.
Force Headquarters,
Winfrith, Dorchester DT2 8DZ.

A Country Diary

NORTHUMBERLAND: Twelve thousand puffins, having wintered somewhere in the Atlantic, are now back on Coquet Island. This is a favourite nesting ground for seabirds, particularly eider ducks. Stand on the shore at Hauxley and you can see this low, flat, rocky island where legend has it that Grace Darling's brother kept the lighthouse, built in 1841 on the site of an old fortified tower. The Venerable Bede records that Coquet Isle was used as a conference centre by the monks and that it was at one consortium that Elfreda, Abbess of Whitby, persuaded St Cuthbert to accept the bishopric offered to him by her brother King Ecgfrith of Northumbria. The first sand-martins and sandwich terns are back on the foreshore at Low Hauxley and Northumberland Wildlife Trust warden, Jim Martin, reports that, for the first time in years, there are 200 knots. There is a local belief that the knot is so called from its call-note and by others that it is a derivative of King Canute, who, history tells, failed to prevent an incoming tide. Certainly, if you stand to watch these plump, grey waders they *do* give the impression of daring the incoming waves to advance. Walking the foreshore I find that many of the waders acquire a cloak of invisibility when standing motionless. Oystercatchers, perfectly bold and black on the wing, are difficult to pick out if they are standing on rocks near the breaking surf. Their piebald plumage blends into the background of rock and white water. Redshank, dunlin and ringed plover are also expert at this camouflage. Mild, sunny weather but we have had storms and there is a variety of shapes and sizes of seaweed and assorted washed-up pieces of salt-impregnated wood. Also pathetic remains of a half-picked small wader carcass at which gulls and corbies have been busy. Jim reports a pair of breeding mute swans, three pairs of greylag geese, shelduck, lapwing and a pair of kestrels setting up territory.

VERONICA HEATH

Diary

Dan Glaister

GOOD to see that the Tory candidate for the relatively safe seat of New Forest East has returned to the fray. Former deputy director of the Conservative Research Department, Dr Julian Lewis — for it is he — popped up at a meeting organised by University College of London's Extra-Mural Department on Wednesday evening. The alternative media seminar was addressed by none other than Simon Regan, editor of the scurrilous journal Scallywag, the subject of close legal attention from Lewis in the past. First question from the gent at the back of the room: "Why has Regan accused Julian Lewis of passing off his MA as a doctorate?" the gent demanded. Er, um. "Why do you persist in these lies?" Faced with a nonplussed Regan, the inquisitor revealed himself, so to speak. "You don't know who I am, do you, Mr Regan? I am Julian Lewis!" At this point the clouds parted and a heavenly choir broke into song. No, that bit's not true. The reality was more surreal. A young lady stood up to refute Regan's past false suggestions that Dr Lewis was homosexual. "I am Julian Lewis's ex-girlfriend and it is only because I am such a lady that I do not come and bop you, Mr Regan," she cried. Hurrah! Next up was Betty from Brockenhurst, treasurer of the New Forest Conservative Association, to vow for Dr Lewis's virility. Events got out of hand when a member of the audience referred to Dr Lewis as Mr Lewis. Big mistake. The rant against this injustice was interrupted by his companions. "Come on Julian, we're going," they chorused. The Doctor was escorted from the building, voice echoing down the corridor.

A NEW day and a new challenge emerges for Neil Hamilton. Following the BBC's decision to pull Martin Bell's Croatia travel programme, on the grounds that it could give the crumpled beige knight an unfair advantage, the ITC has stepped in to cancel another programme featuring the candidate for Tatton. Carlton Food Network's much-watched Ross's Foreign Assignment, in which the fearsome Ross challenges grizzled foreign correspondents to recreate their most memorable meals under fire, has been cancelled "in the interests of impartiality". Quite right too. Bell uses the programme shamelessly to puff his anti-sleaze credentials. His chosen speciality of dandelion leaves, baked beans and stinging nettles in tomato ketchup was created because of his touching refusal to make use of the Sarajevo blackmarket. The programme-makers attempted to ensure balance by inviting Wee Neil, but this would not satisfy the strict ITC rules. Besides, Wee Neil isn't one to share his recipe for Ritz biscuits.

HELP is at hand for befuddled computer users fearing the end of civilisation as we know it as clocks are adjusted on Dec 31, 1999. The Government's Central Computer Agency is to publish a handy six-volume guide to dealing with the digital apocalypse, a snip at £320. Just one problem. The agency is forbidden to talk about it until May 2. Civil Service rules, don't you know.

TODAY'S campaign endorsement comes for Graham Riddick, fearless MP for Colne Valley (recreations: "people, fishing, shooting, sports" — our kinda guy). One resounding statement of support in his election leaflet comes from Barry Lee of Holmfirth, Yorkshire and Humberside's Roadsweeper of the Year 1992. "I was always bumping into Graham in Holmfirth and I am pleased to support him," says Mr Lee. But not, the Diary hopes, on the job, Mr Lee.

BOSSES at a Milan factory thought they had learnt their lesson following a break-in which saw £25,000-worth of tools stolen, reports the Diary's favourite, Dogs Today. They paid £600 for three German Shepherd guard dogs to protect the premises. Four days later, thieves stole the dogs.

Hold the red and blue test-tubes to the light

Commentary

Hugo Young

INVITED to give an early opinion on the differences he saw between the Conservative and Labour Parties, Gore Vidal, the great American iconoclast, produced a line that could serve as a text for much that has followed. "I do not come to *Lilliputia with a measuring* rod," he grandly opined, before sweeping out to fulfil various electoral commissions, including some for the Guardian that will be appearing soon, when the native scribes have exhausted their inventiveness.

Yesterday, both the prime ministers presumptive protested against a judgment that has been widely expressed, though never with the same nerveless hauteur. Each produced words that railed incredulously against the common opinion that, whether in Lilliputia or Ukania, the parties do not stand for anything very different from each other. Mr Blair sounded manic when contending that their policies over the National Health Service proposed quite divergent worlds. Mr Major, in his more rotund way, said that on Europe and much else the "dissimilarities are very stark". That is the view from inside the electoral capsules they both inhabit. Since they're striving with every breath for an all-or-nothing result, they're probably bound to think the world will be shattered one way or the other.

In common with many journalists, I've taken a different line. I'm part of the army against which the politicians are protesting, because it seems to me that the conclusiveness they claim isn't available anywhere, at home or abroad. Neither extreme fear nor extravagant hope, the ingredients of the post-war world for 40 years, any longer impress themselves on voters. Margins of difference are, for the most part, small, and appeals to a malleable centre are universal. Better management of the status quo is the biggest claim, behind the rhetoric, that stands a chance of being convincingly defensible.

But can one, straining for an answer, do better than that? When you boil it down, is there an irreducible sediment left that could be called, stark and credible, the essence of the matter? However much dilution has been attempted on once-solid bodies of policy and philosophy, what is the appeal that either side inextinguishably makes which nobody could deny, or smooth out of meaningful existence? To me the defining claims exist on two axes.

The first runs between the nation and the state. The left still believe in the role of the state. The state as enabler, as back-drop, as benign facilitator of the idea of community has not been excluded from Blair's discourse: indeed, it gets stronger as the campaign goes on, and hasn't been seriously touched by the filling-out of the party-line on privatisation. Everything Gordon Brown says about unemployment, David Blunkett about education, Chris Smith about health, and Blair about his mighty leadership of the state machine, rests on the premise that the state is an entity that must be cherished, without shame or reservation, for the common good.

The right have a fundamentally different aspiration. Their instincts are for the minimal state, and their momentum, were they to astonish the world by winning, would carry them hard in that direction. However slight the impact of 18 Tory years on public spending, the anti-state dream has become much more intensely felt. There are few Tory speeches in which the state, except in its disciplinary role, does not feature merely as a deplorable necessity.

The nation, on the other hand, is something the right believe in with sharper zeal than the left. This, too, is an unchanging truth, one fixed point in the political landscape that has proved immune to desert storms that have left much of the old geography unrecognisable. Again, the campaign has clarified rather than blurred it.

> Neither extreme fear nor extravagant hope any longer impress themselves on voters

What the right say about Europe, and about the reorganisation of power in Britain, speaks for a nation that must not, at any cost, be threatened in its old arrangements. Increasingly, nation, a concept that potently confuses the British nation with its ascendant element, the English, is the bulwark of Tory politics. The left, for their part, make obeisance to nation, and are much concerned to avoid being tagged as anti-British. But being themselves more multi-national, and less in awe of history, they are prepared to re-define what nation is, and suggest how the hallowed processes of nation can be improved. They're ready to liberate Scotland and encompass Europe in ways the right will never contemplate.

That's one large surviving contrast in Lilliputia. There's another, across the line from old to young. Major was *speaking for it yesterday*. Sheer age is taking an ever louder place in his demand for another term. Experience, we're invited to believe, has an incontrovertible claim over innocence, not least in negotiating with the Europeans. If your blood runs cold easily, he makes a decent case. But you have to forget the other side of age: the corruptions, the arrogance, the Scott Report, the Nolan syndrome, the whole grab-bag of material that suggests how very right Lord Acton was in his analysis of power.

Labour, indisputably, is young. That's the risk you run if you decide the time has come to change. It's the other large fact that doctoring, and biting, and smoothing-over, and being all things to all voters, cannot wish away. Along with the matter of the nation and the state, it's one of the few choices that does not require a measuring-rod to make it, nor a senior wrangler to calculate the answer to three decimal points.

Our hopeful hearts

Decca Aitkenhead

SOME time back in the 80s, when he was still funny, Jasper Carrot did a sketch about virgin voters. Perched on his stool, he described a bashful young voter edging into the polling booth, fumbling around with the ballot paper, and Doing It for the first time. Emerging from the booth, he gropes for a post-electoral Woodbine, blushing fiercely for fear everyone can tell from his face that he's just lost his virginity.

It was one of Carrot's better sketches, but not exactly a classic, and few people will remember it. Someone in New Labour clearly did, however, as yesterday the party rushed out a new video designed to show first-time voters how to, well, do it. With a natty title ("Do It"), and a soundtrack, well obviously, from D:Ream, this handy how-to guide will, New Labour thinks, be just the thing to get those lazy slackers out of bed and into the polling booths. Because, said "youth spokesperson" Mo Mowlam, often young people "simply don't know how to vote".

It appears that Labour have forgotten Jasper Carrot was meant to be a comedian. The virginal voter was a *joke* — a fairly amusing idea for a sketch, but one whose blushes New Labour have mistaken for a menace to the entire democratic process.

"A lot of first-time voters," explained a spokeswoman, "may be young, or have just left home, and not seen anyone else vote. You aren't sure what to do, you feel a bit nervous. You know how embarrassing it can be! So this video shows them that it's easy!"

Politicians can often be gormless, and few sensible people take real offence at their advances. But any young voter unlucky enough to be exposed to this video would be entitled to feel genuinely insulted. New Labour has taken on the leering, lumbering mind of the spotty boy who thinks you don't want to sleep with him because you're a virgin. Come on, he coaxes, I'll show you. It's easy — you just do it like this. What doesn't occur to him, in his hormonal rush, is that you're grimly hanging on to your underwear not out of silly first-time nerves, but because you don't fancy him.

The tragedy of the Labour party is that young people *should* fancy it. Of all the voters they should have no problem seducing, it should surely be these. Romantically inclined, in thrall to the big idea, brimming with passion and a sense of possibility, young voters should be a walk-over for a left-of-centre party trying to overthrow a Conservative government as old as some of them. A special video teaching them how to present themselves at a specified location on a well-publicised date in order to put a cross against a name (go along with all your mates, it recommends) should not be considered necessary.

Like many of Thatcher's children, my earliest memory of politics is the morning of May 4, 1979. It's been an unfortunate political generation to belong to; holding a torch to socialism through the 80s, when the ideology had rather lost its looks, we didn't even have the memories of its golden years to hold on to. The Falklands jingo-fest, and Thatcher's triumphant romp back into office were a nasty shock for idealistic pre-adolescents. Our teens were little better.

For a generation which cannot even remember the Winter of Discontent, the miners' dispute was a nasty, brutish and long lesson in political defeat. We were also fairly certain we would be killed in the nuclear holocaust, and were doomed unless we did something about it. Marches against the bomb in Hyde Park, protests on Greenham Common, white poppies on Armistice Day — these all felt, then, like our early experiments in radicalism; we never dreamt that they were, in fact, our lot. The '87 election collided with O-level revision, and passed in a vague haze — all that dressing up in red carrier bags outside the local school on polling day had been for nothing, we realised, and we wondered why they'd bothered with the election at all. A big brother got barred from the student union for punching a gloating Tory as the first results came in.

> We would just like a hint that Labour's been putting on a bit of an act. Just a glimmer of hope would be fine

And then, last time, we really thought we were going to win. We wished Neil Kinnock were less ginger, less verbose, and we fretted about the tabloids, but Thatcher had gone, and the victory we had been dreaming of seemed, at last, to be ours. Canvassing was as tedious as it has always been, but endless evenings spent hassling friends to vote Labour didn't seem *like a total waste of time*. We spent almost as long planning the party we'd throw on our glorious election night.

What we would like from New Labour now is not some help on how to Do It. Instead, we would like some reminders about why we ever fell in love in the first place. In its desperate efforts to ingratiate itself to our dad (aka Mr Murdoch) the party has scrubbed itself up so much we're not sure if we fancy it any more. Even Paddy Ashdown, the safe boy-next-door we used to laugh at, is starting. God forbid, to look like the more exciting option. There is something terribly sad about finding oneself shooting flirty looks at the Lib Dems.

We would just like a hint that Labour's been putting on a bit of an act. Just a glimmer of hope would be fine. To have waited our entire lives for our dream date, only to find he's not Romeo but Tim Nice-But-Dim, would be the final insult to Thatcher's children who always hoped there could be something better worth holding out for.

We will in all probability give Labour our votes anyway on May 1. It would, after all, seem not so much treacherous as bizarre to transfer affections now. But our patience can take few more tests like Ms Mowlam's ham-fisted offer to teach us how to Do It.

"We are wrong," she did add, generously, "to assume that young people aren't interested in politics. Yes, they are disillusioned and disaffected.

"Our message to young people is clear. It's your future. Don't let others decide it for you."

We have been trying not to let others decide it for us for as long as we can remember. And we have been trying not to be disaffected. If it turns out that New Labour really have not been lying to our dad, not even a little bit, God only knows whom the next teenagers will find to pin their hopeful hearts on.

How bulldog Fitz passed the Mandelson test

Bel Littlejohn

DID you see it? Did you? Everybody's talking about it. And Peter tells me that Jack told him that Alastair told him that Cherie told him that Tony really liked it too. It's our New Labour bulldog I'm talking about, of course.

And whose idea was it? *Moi*. Between the two of us, the lovely Peter Mandelson and I have been holding secret auditions for bright attractive New Labour animals since December. But we were both determined to get one which had exactly the right attitude, and which could handle the pressure of a general election.

Let me tell you how it happened. We hired a suite at Blake's Hotel, Peter behind one desk, yours truly behind the other, and we asked the pets to come in one at a time. First up was a goldfish, in a polythene bag, or New Labour Mobile Home, as its owner preferred to call it.

We studied the goldfish hard. At first Peter M was mad keen. "First she's a female, and we need to win over the females in the key marginals," he purred. Then he peered more closely through the polythene bag. "And second, I just love the way her mouth opens and shuts, opens and shuts, opens and shuts, always carefully avoiding saying anything that might get us into trouble. That's very New Labour!"

He was about to sign her up on a six-month contract when I pointed out that her colour might prove a problem. "People might think she was a Lib Dem," I said.

"Then we'll paint her red with a splash of Dulux Emulsion Gloss — no one'll be able to tell," he snapped.

"But then she'd die, and where would we be?"

"Let's not split hairs, Bel," he replied. "I can't see that it would make the slightest difference. And on the positive side, at least a dead goldfish wouldn't be able to fall out of line with our manifesto promises, to which all New Labour candidates have pledged allegiance."

After a lot of humming and hawing, Peter eventually agreed that, in the present hothouse atmosphere, a dead goldfish could prove a liability particularly if it shed too many scales over the electorate in the key marginals before May 1. So we wished the goldfish the very best of luck in the future and called for the next applicant.

At first we thought that the next applicant had not heard our request. But then we heard a slithery sound and looked down. Our next applicant was a six-foot python.

"Take a seat," said Peter, pointing to a swivel-chair. The python's jaws opened wide. The *swivel-chair vanished*. Peter went white. "Well that certainly shows admirable resolution and vigour," he said. "But I'm wondering if it isn't sending out a slightly too *inclusive* message to the floating voter?" I noticed that there was sweat on his brow as Peter did everything he could to let the python down gently. "I feel sure there'll be a very positive role for you in any future New Labour administration," he said, showing him the door. "For instance, my friend Alastair Campbell is in desperate need of a new pair of hands. Between the two of us the pressure's been getting to him."

There followed a succession of unsuitable animals. I thought a hedgehog would send out too *prickly* a message. "He could always shave," said Peter. "Look at me. I did, and I'm now widely regarded as our principal asset." But I over-ruled him. A hedgehog, however well-behaved, might appear too insignificant an opponent against a Tory hard-hitter such as Michael Heseltine or Dr Mawhinney. A giraffe too, was given the thumbs-down. "The neck's just too long," said Peter. "It wouldn't look good on Newsnight. You'd have to have an aerial crane camera, and theirs is already booked for Peter Snow."

TOUGH times call for tough decisions. But then, just as we were growing despondent, who should barge in but our British bulldog. "I see it now!" cooed Peter. "It's a perfect metaphor for Britain under New Labour!" He put his hand out to pat it, but the bulldog turned and bit him.

"He just bit you!" I screamed.

"No he didn't! No he didn't!" protested Peter. "He was simply attempting to promote a more *positive, dynamic* image of Britain under New Labour! And if he can do that to my finger, just imagine what he'll do for the tax burdens on voters in the key marginals!"

And so our bulldog got the job, and he's taken to it like a duck to water. Peter takes him everywhere, of course, so if ever one of his statements needs clarifying, Peter's always to hand. Yesterday, the bulldog was accused by the Tory Dirty Tricks Department of growling at Peter Sissons on Election Call. But Peter was having none of it. "He was merely restating New Labour policy on the single market in a forceful manner."

Peter is now predicting that our bulldog's on the fast-track for a seat in Tony's first Cabinet. "Poor Johnny Prescott's looking a little tired, poor love. For his own sake he'd be much happier tucked up all snug in a nice kennel."

Blair's brains explode.

"THE LEFT DISLIKE HIS ARROGANCE, HIS INTOLERANCE, HIS PREACHY SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS. 'THE MAN'S A RAGING EGOMANIAC,' IS ONE OF THE MORE PRINTABLE COMMENTS."

Robert Taylor finds Labour's left-wing thinkers having severe second thoughts about the man and the party they helped to create. Only in The Spectator, out today.

THE SPECTATOR

Letting down the tyres of political bandwagons. And stealing the jack.

Chaim Herzog

A gentleman in the war for peace

CHAIM Herzog, who has died aged 77, crowned a successful career in the Israeli military and secret services, business, law and broadcasting to become president of the state of Israel from 1983 to 1993. He used that office to soothe emotions during a difficult decade in Israeli history. Always dapper in appearance, Herzog brought to Israel a touch of Anglo-Saxon coolness and constitutionality. In 1993 he became its first president to pay a state visit to London.

Born in Belfast, Herzog was nine months old when his father, Isaac Halevy Herzog, became Chief Rabbi of Ireland and the family moved to Dublin. At Wesley College he excelled at cricket, rugby and boxing. He always retained a special affection for Ireland and reputedly spoke Hebrew with a trace of an Irish accent. He once noted that seeing Ireland's independence struggle had prepared him for his later life.

In 1935 Herzog left for Palestine, where he studied at a *yeshivah* — a talmudic academy — and fought with the Haganah, the Jewish militia in Jerusalem during the Arab Revolt. After his father became Chief Rabbi of Palestine's Ashkenazi community in 1937, he read law at London University and was called to the Bar in 1942.

During the second world war, he trained as a paratrooper at Sandhurst. He joined the first British division in Normandy, rose to the rank of major and was wounded at Bremen. Exposure to Nazi atrocities matured him quickly. He interrogated Heinrich Himmler, became a district governor in occupied Germany and represented Montgomery at the first Jewish displaced persons' conference at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

When the war ended, so did the truce between Palestinian Jewry and the British Mandate authorities. Zionists were now set on achieving statehood and Herzog was chosen to head the Haganah's intelligence unit. Unusually for an observant Jew, he found a natural home in David Ben-Gurion's socialist establishment. From his father he inherited a respect for other faiths, which showed in his lifelong admiration for Arab civilization.

During Israel's war of independence (1947-1949), Brigadier-General Herzog masterminded the victory at Latrun and broke the Arab siege of Jerusalem. In 1948, at the age of 30, he became head of Israeli military intelligence, a post he held until 1950 (and again later from 1959 to 1962). From 1950 to 1954 he served as defence attache in Washington, and, after commanding the southern army on his return from the US, he retired from regular military service in 1962.

Between 1962 and 1972 Herzog presided over a major Israeli investment group and afterwards was a senior partner in a firm of advocates. He also helped set up Israel Aircraft Industries and learnt to fly, and was active in banking and many artistic and educational foundations.

In 1967 Herzog was recalled to military service in two unusual capacities. As a broadcaster, he relayed Israel's stunning victory in the Six-Day War. Immediately after the war he was appointed military governor of the occupied West Bank, a real test of his diplomatic skills. He broadcast again during the 1973 Yom Kippur War in Hebrew, French and English, and in 1975, as Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, it was his lot to oppose the "Zionism is racism" motion — for which he won plaudits with his condemnation of "the two great evils [of] hatred and ignorance."

Menachem Begin's Likud victory in the 1977 elections seemed like a death-knell for all that Herzog stood for. Nonetheless, he entered the Knesset in 1981 and served the Labour opposition for two years, although most agree that he had left his political career too late. Despite being sidelined by Labour's leaders, the Knesset chose him over Begin's nominee to become president.

From the outgoing president, Yitzhak Navon, Herzog inherited a country deeply split between Arabs and Jews; and within the Jewish community, between hawks and doves, religious and secular, Ashkenazis and Sephardis. Above all, it was seething over the quagmire of the Lebanon war. At his inauguration on May 5, 1983, Herzog declared that he would fight "the new enemy which threatens to divide us from within," and later condemned the "cowardice, disrespect and intolerance that has become a norm."

Ever the diplomat, he worked well with Begin and his successor, Yitzhak Shamir, and never presumed to subvert policies he disagreed with — on Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, for instance. Yet equally he stuck to what he thought was just. To Herzog, Jewish settlers who took the law into their own hands and attacked Palestinians were treasonous underminers of democracy. He blamed religious leaders for acquiescing in such violence and shunned the racist Rabbi Kahane after the latter's election in 1984.

Herzog did make enemies. A far-right group planned to kill him while leftists were furious when he truncated the sentence on Jewish terrorists. Herzog himself later regretted pardoning security chiefs for criminal behaviour. Nonetheless, most people admired him and his presidency was renewed in 1988.

> Herzog was blessed with a certain modicum of good luck — and yet there is still a sense of an opportunity lost, for he never played the leading political role which his attributes merited

During his second term he faced the twin challenge of the intifada and rising ultra-orthodox Jewish power. Coming from a religious background himself, Herzog defended secular Jews who had built and fought for Israel, and attacked the perks and disproportionate political clout accrued by the ultra-orthodox. Only a "catastrophic" political system could allow such anomalies, he said.

Palestinian leaders and soldiers, alarmed at their duties in the territories, turned to Herzog for a listening ear. Through bargaining he reduced the use of deportation as a punishment. In May 1993 he handed over the presidency to Ezer Weizman and retired to Herzliyya.

Herzog also wrote prolifically. He was the author of *Israel's Finest Hour* (1967), *Days of Awe* (1973), *The War of Atonement* (1975), *Who Stands Accused?* (1978), *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (1982) and *Heroes of Israel* (1989). Together with Mordechai Gichon he wrote *Battles of the Bible* in 1978; and he edited *Judaism, Law and Ethics* in 1974. In 1992 he released *Between the Sacred and the Everyday*, a compilation of his radio talks.

Herzog's final speech to a British audience was at this month's Jewish Book Week. All the familiar hallmarks were there, the charm with which he wooed his audience — playing on residual antagonisms to the UN and France — the deft politician's manner of parrying awkward questions; the eternal publicist's pooh-poohing of any suggestion that the Israeli Defence Forces were either less competent or patriotic than they had been in his halcyon days; the nationalist who defended Israel's "right to build" in East Jerusalem, and the pragmatist who queried its timing.

Yet combined with this was a surprising frankness when he spoke of Britain's own colonial excesses in pre-independence Ireland; and even a discernible sense of disappointment that Israel had yet to learn the values of political "fair play" and accountability which he cherished so highly.

Chaim Herzog was blessed with a certain modicum of good luck — such as the fortuitous trip to the gents which probably saved his life during the bombing of the Jewish Agency's Jerusalem headquarters in 1948. And yet there is still a sense of an opportunity lost, for he never played the leading political role which his attributes merited. On hearing of his death, Shimon Peres praised him as "perhaps the most statesmanlike person Israel ever knew". Yet was it precisely this regality which Israelis misintrepreted as aloofness? Despite commitment and courage, perhaps Herzog was ultimately too much of a gentleman for the rough and tumble of Knesset politics.

He is survived by his widow Aura (née Ambache), three sons, a daughter, three grandaughters and two grandsons.

Lawrence Joffe

Chaim Herzog, solider and politician, born September 17, 1919; died April 17, 1997

The listener . . . Palestinian leaders and Israeli soldiers, alarmed at their duties in the West Bank, turned to Herzog for advice

Emilio Azcarraga

Money, media and Mexico

Azcarraga . . . working to 'to entertain and distract the poor'

THE Mexican media tycoon Emilio Azcarraga, "el tigre" (the tiger), who has died of cancer aged 66, did more than any other individual to prop up what novelist Mario Vargas Llosa famously described as the "perfect dictatorship" of his country's Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI.

Creator of the Televisa network, the world's most prolific producer and broadcaster of television programmes, he used what was until recently an effective monopoly in unashamed support of the government. "The company is on the side of Mexico, of the president of the republic and of the PRI," he said in 1990. "We are of the system."

Azcarraga's father, also called Emilio, was the creator of mass entertainment in Mexico, setting up a nationwide radio network and building the Churrubusco studios, the cradle of Mexican cinema. The son found his father hard to work with. As a 17-year-old he preferred to earn his living selling the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but he was persuaded to join the sales department of the fledgling Telesistema Mexicano. And when he finally handed the reins of Televisa to his own 29-year-old son, Emilio Azcarraga Jean, last month, the empire was worth almost $4 billion and "el tigre" was the second richest Latin American on the Forbes magazine list.

The Televisa group owns four national television networks, the biggest Mexican cable television system, three major record companies, 16 radio stations, a film company and a publishing house which sells 120 million books a year in 23 countries. There are also massive foreign holdings and one of Azcarraga's most recent ventures was an alliance with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and Brazil's TV Globo to bring direct-to-home (DTH) television to Latin America. A keen football supporter, Azcarraga also owned the Azteca stadium (now renamed Guillermo Canedo) and two of the country's best soccer teams, America and Necaxa.

But it is above all as a "soldier of the president" — his own phrase — that Azcarraga will be remembered. Under the 1988-94 presidency of Carlos Salinas, television was opened up to competition, but the influence of Televisa remains enormous — as much through its hugely successful *telenovelas*, the soap operas it sells in at least 40 countries, as through its much-criticised news output.

In 1993, in a rare public pronouncement, Azcarraga told reporters that a television company's responsibility was "to entertain the poor and distract them from their sad reality and their difficult future". Education and culture, he believed, was the role of government, not of the mass media, although he himself was a noted arts patron and founder of Mexico City's Museum of Contemporary Art.

Ruling party politicians were grateful for the consistent refusal of Televisa to give air-time to the opposition and for the tranquilising effect of the *telenovelas*. "It's better to use tearjerkers than teargas," one of them once said, adding, "If the nanny keeps the children quiet, why change her?"

A regular visitor to the presidential residence of Los Pinos, and informal adviser to at least six successive heads of state, Azcarraga was also a generous contributor to PRI coffers. In 1993, when Carlos Salinas hosted a campaign-funding dinner for the country's richest men, the suggested donation to the party was reportedly $25 million.

ACCORDING to those present, Azcarraga stood up and said: "I have made so much money in the past few years that I have committed myself to giving more." His contribution was variously reported as between $70 million and $75 million. "In the PRI we cannot forget," said the party's secretary-general, Juan S Millan, "that Emilio Azcarraga always expressed his allegiance to our party."

The times, however, were a-changing, and even Azcarraga realised that Televisa must move with them. When Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took over last year as president of the Party of the Democratic Revolution — *bete noir* of the PRI — Televisa's veteran news anchor, Jacobo Zabludovsky, interviewed him live on the notoriously slanted *24 Hours* programme. Obrador seemed almost as surprised as the viewers. Ever since the PRD split from the PRI in 1987, its appearances on Televisa had been minimal and seemingly designed to present it as a party of violence.

Actress and theatre director Jesusa Rodriguez — one of Televisa's most outspoken critics — was clearly unmoved by the change. Expressing the hope that Azcarraga's death would improve the quality of Mexican television, she added: "I have one enemy less". He leaves a wife, Adriana, a former Miss Mexico, three daughters and a son.

Phil Gunson

Emilio Azcarraga Milmo, media tycoon, born September 8, 1930; died April 16, 1997

Birthdays

Michael Beloff, QC, president, Trinity College, Oxford, 55; **Stephenie Bergman**, artist, 51; **Dr Clive Booth**, vice-chancellor, Oxford Brookes University, 54; **Anna Somers Cocks**, editor, the Art Newspaper, 47; **Nick Farr-Jones**, rugby player, 35; **Barbara Hale**, actress, 75; **Sir Peter Hordern**, Conservative MP, 68; **Malcolm Marshall**, cricketer, 39; **Lord Mason**, former Labour defence secretary, 73; **Hayley Mills**, actress, 51; **Fr Dominic Milroy**, former headmaster, Ampleforth College, 65; **Sir Teddy Taylor**, Conservative MP, 60; **Ian Taylor**, MP, junior minister for trade and industry, 52.

Death Notices

NICHOLAS, Sir Herbert Richard, known as Sir Harry Nicholas, on 14th April 1997 aged 92. Former General Secretary of the Labour party and acting General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union. Cremation at Streatham Vale Crematorium, on Thursday 24th April at 1pm. Flowers or donations to Age Concern should be sent to Dowsett & Jenkins, 7 Sunny Hill Road, Streatham, London SW16 2UG, Tel. 0181 769 3181.

■To place your announcement telephone 0171 713 4567 or fax 0171 713 4139 between 9am and 3pm Mon-Fri.

Jackdaw

Dream on

YOU can instantly get out of any bad situation by telling yourself it's only a dream. That's the startling claim of Leroy Tellor, who says he's used the approach successfully a dozen times in his 74 years, to escape everything from death in World War II to a crumbling marriage.

"With practice I believe anyone can use this same technique to resolve any crisis they encounter in their lives," says Tellor, author of a new book, *Wake up to a New Tomorrow*. "Our B17 was hit by German anti-aircraft fire over France. The fuel tank exploded and the plane burst into flames. As we went into a nose dive and my buddies scrambled to bail out, I shut my eyes, wishing that none of it was happening. I started muttering, 'This is only a dream — it's only a dream.' Miraculously, I suddenly woke up in a cold sweat and found myself in bed at my parent's farmhouse back in Indiana.

"Later, the folks told me I'd never gone away to war or even been drafted. Yet I could remember every detail of basic training. Eventually I went to the air force. They had no record of my name — but they did have the names of each of my buddies from the dream. They had all died in a B17 shot down over France."

Life went on and Tellor eventually discounted the incident, until 11 years later when the Chevrolet he was driving suffered a blow-out and careened off a 75-foot cliff outside Los Angeles.

As the car plummeted Tellor flashed back to his previous experience — and again told himself, "It's only a dream." He says: "I woke up in my own home — and when I went outside, there was a Ford parked in the driveway instead of a chevy".

Day-dream believer Leroy Tellor, in the American tabloid Weekly World News.

Naming names

NOTWITHSTANDING the storm of controversy that followed [Wandsworth] council's actions, there is little new in the idea of using publicity as a means of punishing criminal or anti-social behaviour. The disciplinary power of the stocks and pillories — medieval devices of punishment that managed to survive into the 19th century — relied heavily upon the presence of a hostile crowd willing to subject transgressors to a barrage of stones, rotten vegetables, dung and verbal abuse. Shaming the criminal was part of the process.

History Today on the shaming and naming of criminals in Victorian, Edwardian and 20th century Britain.

Beastly stories

LET'S face it, there are some pretty strange creatures running, swimming and flying about in Britain today. Northumberland, for instance, is home to a thriving pack of wallabies, which escaped from a local zoo in the 19th century, and there are known to be hordes of foreign scorpions living in Sheerness docks.

All this is well-documented and quite reasonable. But, on the other hand, there remain some quite frankly unbelieveable theories, supported by far less evidence. Sure, we've all heard of the Loch Ness Monster, but who has ever seen a convincing pic which shows the size of the beast? Numerous photos of big cats are almost certainly just that — pictures of abnormally large cats . . . Oh, and the occasional fox with a rabbit in its mouth.

These claims, however, are tame compared to the bizarre creatures that people continue to insist they've seen — nearly always without any corroborative witnesses. According to the believers, the whole of Britain is alive with mermaids, sea monsters and hosts of unidentified feline prowlers.

Britain's bizarre beasts are given plenty of coverage in this month's Focus magazine.

Peace principle

THE fanatic who shot my father on November 4, 1995 was really aiming to kill the peace process. His bullets still ricochet. Until that day, I was content to let my father tend to politics while I pursued my career in computer science. But his assassination taught me that it is every citizen's responsibility to defend democracy through participation.

Yuval Rabin, son of the late Yitzhak Rabin, talks to Newsweek about the lessons he learnt from his father.

Llama karma

DOGS may be a man's best friend, but llamas are clearly gunning for second place, at least with therapists. The camel-like creatures, which normally call the mountains of South America home, have suddenly become a popular remedy for combating stress and behavioural problems.

In Rupert, Idaho, a pilot project launched last July uses llamas to teach teenage offenders to develop affection and concern for other creatures. Meanwhile, in White Rock, British Columbia, the Llama Therapeutic Group offers stress management sessions and plans to set up corporate accounts.

Then there's a psychotherapist; George Appenzeller, Ph.D, who in 1989 incorporated the mammals into his South Carolina practice to treat abused and neglected children, in which each kid grooms and hikes with a llama companion. Why llamas and not, say, wildebeest? "Llamas are very calm and accepting," says Appenzeller. "They stick together and take care of each other without giving up their individuality, so you could say they're good role models."

And, he adds: "You have to push a llama pretty far before he'll spit on you."

Psychology Today on life, love and llamas.

Focus . . . on bizarre beasts

Net gains

PARENTS who hate seeing their darlings "mindlessly" glued to the computer screen can console themselves that they could be on the cutting edge of educational attainment. In one of the first studies of its kind, "on-line learning" emerged a clear winner over traditional teaching methods — at least at university level. A class of sociology students at California State University was split into two groups for a course on statistics: half the students were given weekly seminars and the other half shut themselves up with their computers and took part in e-mail and World Wide Web discussion groups. In the end-of-term examinations, the on-line group out-performed the traditional one by 20 per cent.

Professor Jerald Schutte, who led the experiment, suggests that the on-line group, being denied face-to-face interaction with a teacher, made a greater effort to work together; there was more collaboration via the computer than among those taking part in classroom discussions.

Vogue proves computer nerds needn't be drop-outs.

Jackdaw wants your jewels. E-mail jackdaw@guardian.co.uk.; fax 0171-713 4366; write Jackdaw, The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER.

Hannah Pool

Inflation figure just misses target

Mixed reaction to latest data

Charlotte Denny

THE Government has missed its election inflation goal by no more than a whisker despite a fall in the target rate to the lowest level for two years, according to data revealed yesterday by the Office for National Statistics.

After a week of positive economic figures for the Conservatives, the March price data — the last to be published before polling day — showed that the Government's preferred measure of inflation, which excludes mortgage costs, fell from 2.9 to 2.7 per cent last month. The Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, had pledged to get underlying inflation below 2.5 per cent by the end of this Parliament.

Mr Clarke was upbeat about the numbers in spite of missing his target.

"Hard on the heels of yesterday's excellent news on borrowing and unemployment, today's figures show that Britain's economy is booming while inflation stays well under control," he said.

But Labour seized on the the failure to meet the 2.5 per cent target as another broken promise on the economy. Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown said: "Far from best on inflation in Europe, Britain is today ninth out of 15 countries."

The ONS figures showed that the broader measure of inflation, which includes mortgage interest rates, also dropped last month. The annual rate of increase in the retail prices index fell from 2.7 per cent in February to 2.6 per cent last month.

City analysts said the figures were a touch lower than expected thereby reducing the pressure for a post-election interest rate hike.

Roger Bootle, chief economist at HSBC markets, one of the Chancellor's panel of Wise People said that worries about inflation were "overblown".

A sharp fall in the price of seasonal food over the month was chiefly responsible for the drop in the RPI, ONS statisticians said.

Price tags on fresh fruit and vegetables fell by 2.6 per cent, the largest recorded in March for 40 years. Poor weather conditions this time last year boosted prices of fresh vegetables.

Economist Simon Briscoe from Nikko bank said that the figures had been flattered by the weakness of food prices: "It is a case of vegetables saving Clarke's bacon."

The ONS said that sterling's rise had also contributed to the fall in food prices, but it was not possible to say by how much because the index did not distinguish between domestic and imported items.

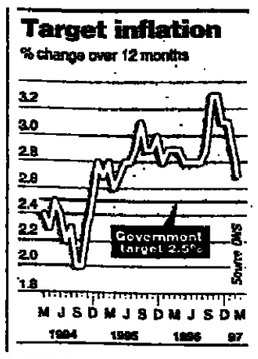
Mr Briscoe warned that apart from food prices, most other items in the index were rising, suggesting that high street retailers were taking advantage of strong domestic demand to put up prices.

Households goods, clothing and footware all showed rises over the month, as retailers raised prices after the sales and introduced new lines.

Clothing and footwear rose by 2 per cent last month, compared to 1.4 per cent in March last year. Household goods increased by 2.5 per cent in the month compared with a rise of only 1.7 per cent last March.

The data from the ONS showed that while inflation in the goods sector is slowing, prices in the service sector continue to boom, fuelled by rising earnings.

Mr Briscoe pointed to the downward trend in goods inflation as evidence that price pressures were under control.



Fisher defends dividend policy

ALBERT Fisher, the food processor and distributor, yesterday defended its high dividend policy, despite announcing an increase in first-half pre-tax profits of only 2 per cent, to £19.1 million, *writes Ian King*.

Chairman Stephen Walls (pictured, left), who has been criticised by some analysts for an over-generous dividend, denied that the company was hindering its growth by continuing with such a high pay-out to shareholders.

At the same time, Mr Walls declined to say whether he would be relinquishing his executive position at the company in the near future, adding: "The important thing is to get through the next six months. That's a question more for the full-year results."

Albert Fisher, whose shares rallied ¼p to 43p on the figures, said it had been hit to the tune of £1.3 million by the strength of sterling.

The company also reported that profits in its seafood division had been affected by last winter's poor weather, which had devastated its cockle beds in the North Sea.

Neil England (right), chief executive, said the group would be bringing all its food manufacturing operations under one brand name, in an attempt to strengthen its negotiating position with its customers, which include McDonald's.

He said the move would also enable Albert Fisher to get better positioning for its products — which also include citrus fruits, frozen vegetables, sauces and dressings — in supermarkets.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID MANSELL

Names fear closed door at Lloyd's

Investors jib at plan to raise deposits for underwriting

Pauline Springett

A FURIOUS row erupted yesterday between Lloyd's of London and its investing Names over proposals for a sharp increase in the deposits members must make with the market if they want to carry on trading.

The furore could set back Lloyd's attempts to repair its tattered reputation following last year's £3.2 billion rescue deal. The market nearly collapsed after it lost £8 billion in 1988-92.

Under the proposals, Names must in effect have at least 62.5 per cent of the value of the insurance they underwrite at Lloyd's. Some 37.5 per cent of this will have to be paid to Lloyd's as a deposit, while the remaining 25 per cent must be shown to exist. The present deposit requirement is 30 per cent.

To join the market at all, Names will have to be worth at least £350,000, up from the present £250,00.

Andrew Duguid, Lloyd's director of strategy, said the aim was to phase in the new rules by the year 2000. He said Lloyd's wanted to reassure policyholders, regulators, rating agencies and brokers that the market was sufficiently financially robust to withstand any more vast losses.

The Names see the new rules as designed to squeeze them out in favour of the limited-liability corporate investors which were first allowed to join Lloyd's in 1994.

Robert Miller, spokesman for the Association of Lloyd's Members, which represents 9,000 Names, described the proposals as intolerable and accused Lloyd's of betraying the people who ensured the market's survival by paying their losses. He said Lloyd's appeared intent on kicking out its traditional unlimited-liability Names. The association would press Lloyd's to modify the proposals.

Sir William Arbuthnot, deputy chairman of the 600-strong High Premium Group, which represents the market's richest Names, was similarly scathing, saying that Lloyd's should consider increasing the deposit levels required by the new corporate vehicles.

"We are very concerned about the security behind some of the corporates," he said. The HPG meets next week to discuss how it will oppose the plan.

Lloyd's pool of traditional Names has been shrinking, now numbering only 10,000, having reached 34,000 in the mid-1980s. But Mr Duguid denied that Lloyd's expected or hoped these new measures to accelerate the exodus. "I wouldn't expect many people to leave, although some might reduce the amount they underwrite," he conceded.

The proposals, which are up for consultation until May 16, also include a tightening of the investment rules relating to the deposits held, as well as a clampdown on the use of less secure reinsurance companies by syndicates.

There will also be a new requirement for every syndicate to be certified as solvent each year by a recognised actuary.

World debt rescue in jeopardy

Sarah Ryle

LABOUR last night signalled its determination to help the world's poorest countries reduce their debt burden as it welcomed a critical report published by Oxfam.

Debt Experts at the charity are warning that an international plan to reduce Third World debt repayments to industrialised countries is in jeopardy, threatening the lives of more than three million children. Chancellor Kenneth Clarke was a key supporter of the World Bank relief programme which was agreed by the most powerful nations last year, but countries including the US and Germany have hardened their resistance to a rapid introduction.

The idea was to reward developing countries such as Uganda and Bolivia for their efforts to improve and stabilise their economies by offering more relief on the money they owe institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

Labour has backed the initiative. Clare Short, shadow minister for overseas development, said: "This report is deeply worrying because it shows that a serious commitment to debt relief on a global level is being undermined. This failure sends entirely the wrong signals to other indebted countries trying to reform their economies."

Britain will not be represented by a minister when the World Bank and IMF boards meet a week from now. Usually, the Chancellor would promote Britain's position but the election means the job has fallen to Bank of England governor Eddie George.

Oxfam said that if the plan, called the Highly Indebted Poor Country initiative, was delayed, over the next seven years 3.2 million children from the poorest nations would die.

News in brief

Tie Rack ties knot with Fujita

TIE Rack, the tie retailer and designer, has set up a joint venture with Japanese group Fujita in a bid to expand its operations in Asia-Pacific.

The 50-50 venture with Fujita — owner of 50 per cent of the McDonald's burger chain in Japan — is an extension of a licensing agreement under which Fujita has opened 11 Tie rack stores since July 1995.

In the 53 weeks to February 2, Tie Rack's pre-tax profits increased by 11 per cent to £8.79 million on sales 9 per cent ahead to £105.1 million. At the year end, there were 415 shops, up from 379 the year before.

Overseas operations now account for 48 per cent of sales and chairman Roy Bishko warned that the strength of sterling continued to have an impact on overseas earnings. — *Dominic Walsh*

IPE seeks Pool reform

MASSIVE reform of the wholesale electricity market is needed whichever political party wins the election, the International Petroleum Exchange said yesterday. The Exchange, which is developing an electricity futures contract, is warning both main parties that the wholesale market, known as the Pool, is too easily manipulated by generators for a derivative to be fairly traded.

Development of a futures market would enable companies to hedge the purchase and sale of electricity against price volatility, and would help competition develop in the supply of power to homes in 1998.

The IPE's call for Pool reform follows similar pressure from large energy users, such as chemicals companies, and other consumer groups. — *Chris Barrie*

Ritblat buys Beatles venue

CONRAD Ritblat, the property group chaired by British Land boss John Ritblat, is to buy 16/20 Manchester Square, the London office building where the Beatles once famously posed, for £10 million from the Prudential.

At the same time, the company announced plans to refurbish the building substantially, with the work expected to be complete by the end of 1998.

The deal, which Conrad Ritblat is financing through a £10.3 million placing and open offer, brings the group's property spending over the last four years to £54 million.

Under the terms of the placing Conrad Ritblat shareholders have been offered 33 new shares in the group, at 245p each, for every 100 shares they currently own. The existing shares slipped 5p to 260p. — *Ian King*

Switch at Wm Morrison

KEN Morrison, chairman and managing director of northern supermarkets chain Wm Morrison, is to relinquish the position of managing director after 41 years in the job.

But 65-year-old Mr Morrison, who is being replaced by joint deputy managing director John Dowd, will retain the position of executive chairman.

Mr Morrison, who has been with the company — which was founded by his father — since completing his National Service in 1952, is also expected to retain his 7.24 per cent stake in the company. — *Ian King*

IoD calls for 'business ethics'

Roger Cowe

INSTITUTE of Directors leader, Tim Melville-Ross, last night accused the business community of concentrating on financial returns for shareholders at the expense of other stakeholders and its wider responsibilities.

He told a meeting of business leaders that a campaign was needed to change business attitudes and promote ethical values, to protect the interests of all stakeholders.

Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Forum for Ethics in the Workplace, under the auspices of the Royal Society for Arts, Mr Melville-Ross said: "The problem is that the business community is not seen to be central to society, nor to be playing its part in creating a just society . . . The problem may be aggravated by an unwillingness or even an inability by business leaders to understand it."

The director-general of the institute, normally regarded as ultra-conservative, told the forum that society was changing fast and was increasingly distrustful of big business, which needed to earn trust if it was to play a full and prosperous part in society.

Calling on company directors to abandon their narrow focus on "shareholder value", Mr Melville-Ross said: "Most thoughtful business leaders know that great companies are not built by obsessive attention to shareholder value. Great companies arise, in part, out of a shared sense of purpose among employees and management . . .

"When executives ignore the interests of one group of stakeholders systematically over time, those stakeholders will use the political process to force regulation or legislation that protects themselves."

He called for a movement to promote business ethics and make business attractive to young people: "Something more like a movement than a campaign is required, applying pressure over a long period to change behaviour and attitudes."

The movement's programme could be based on a report by an influential panel which would define "a vision for business in a just society to aspire to".

Financial institutions should also demonstrate that they are more interested in long-term value than short-term financial performance.

Henry Boot

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Operating profit	£9.2m	£7.5m
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Dividends per share	8.0p	7.5p
Net assets per share	214p	196p

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Inflation figure just misses target, page 15

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Finance Guardian

CWS suspends two of its most senior executives as offshore predator eyes business's juicy offshoots

Co-op chiefs in 'breach of trust'

Julia Finch and Martyn Halsall

THE Co-operative Wholesale Society was in crisis last night after suspending two of its most senior executives amid allegations that they had formed secret links with Andrew Regan, who is planning a hostile break-up of the entire movement.

The CWS accused the two of a "suspected recent serious breach of trust".

They are Allan Green, controller of the CWS retailing division, and David Chambers, chief general manager of the group's buying and marketing operations.

The men, who are close colleagues, were confronted when they arrived at their Manchester office yesterday. They were suspended on full pay pending an investigation into "business dealings" they have had over the past three years with companies controlled by Mr Regan, aged 31. The inquiry is likely to last two weeks.

"Allan Green was the second most powerful executive in the CWS and for him to be suspended in this way is really quite alarming," said one Co-op worker last night. "This is one of the biggest crises the CWS has ever faced."

Mr Regan heads the offshore investment company Lanica, which is on the verge of making a £500 million hostile bid for some of the movement's non-food businesses, such as its funeral parlours and travel agencies, through its Galileo offshoot.

The CWS, which believes it is bid-proof because it is owned by its 300,000 members, has nevertheless been orchestrating a high-profile campaign to guarantee its independence. But for weeks, rumours have been circulating that Mr Regan has been benefiting from inside information.

Last night, however, Co-op insiders were shocked at the seniority of the men suspended. Neither of the two said anything yesterday.

City lawyers Linklaters and Paines, and accountants KPMG have been called in to investigate the men's conduct.

Mr Green and Mr Chambers are two of chief executive Graham Melmoth's most trusted and powerful deputies. They first met Andrew Regan in 1994 when he bought 10 of CWS's food factories for £111 million.

Mr Regan closed several of the factories and streamlined others before selling what was left to Hillsdown Holdings for £121 million.

The suspensions have torpedoed the radical new senior management structure, named only last July, which led to the biggest revolution the Co-op had experienced in a generation.

Mr Green was in the top tier of four people, which Mr Melmoth chaired, and Mr Chambers was among five members of a second tier.

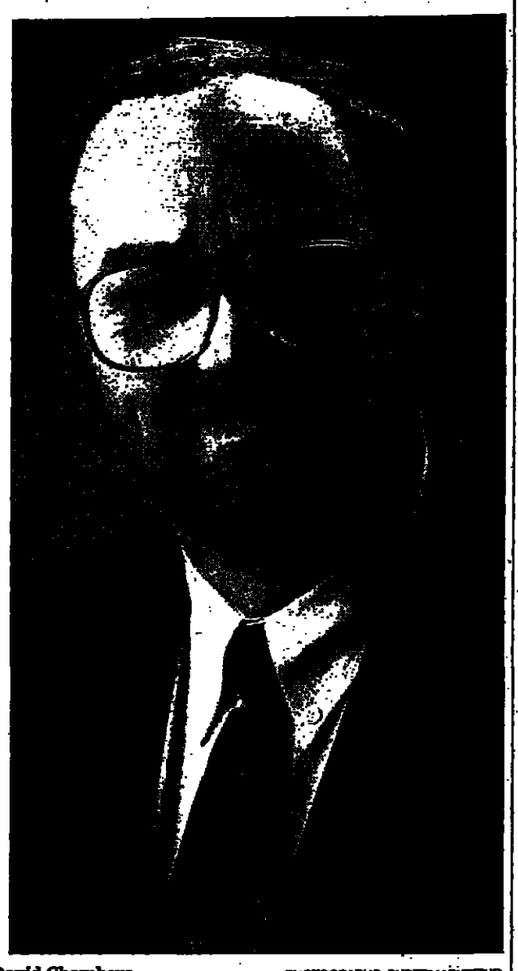
The men's suspension follows the recent departure of another member of Mr Melmoth's senior team, leaving only two of the four appointed only nine months ago. Observers said John Owen decided to leave the movement through disappointment when he did not get the top job, which was given to Mr Melmoth.

Yesterday's announcement will ensure a stormy CWS annual meeting in Manchester on May 17 and dominate the annual Co-op Congress, which assembles for its four-day meeting in Cardiff on May 24.

Mr Green joined CWS in 1990 as general manager of buying and retail marketing. He was previously buying director of cash and carry group Booker. He has homes in London and central Manchester, and is understood to earn between £200,000 and £250,000 a year.

When Mr Melmoth joined CWS, he swiftly promoted Mr Green. Last night one insider said: "He rose like a meteor."

Mr Chambers joined the CWS in 1998. He was previously employed by discount store chain Poundstretcher. "As Mr Green was promoted, so Mr Chambers took on Mr Green's responsibilities", said a Co-op source.



Suspended from duty . . . the CWS's Allan Green, left, and David Chambers PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPERMARKETING

Lanica's view

GALILEO

- Some blue chip backers
- Says the £500m could be reinvested in Co-op's food businesses
- Claims Co-op performance is dire
- Co-op board in disarray
- Already profited from buying Co-op's food manufacturing

The Co-op's response

co op

- 150 years of history
- Casts doubt on Lanica's finances
- Structure makes hostile bid difficult
- Principles count more than profit
- Strategic review already under way

Notebook

Movement with little to go for it

Edited by Alex Brummer

WE MAY now know why Andrew Regan, representing a peculiar form of Monaco-style capitalism, was so confident of storming the worker's citadel of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. In the best tradition of socialist groups, the CWS appears to have been infiltrated by a fifth column — in the shape of retail controller Allan Green and chief general manager David Chambers — who allegedly have been conducting clandestine business relations with Mr Regan.

While the CWS's chief executive, Graham Melmoth, has fought to defend the Co-op movement from unsuitable marauders, the two suspended executives apparently were making sure Mr Regan and his associates were kept informed.

This might well explain why Mr Regan has never given up the chase, despite negative publicity, a suspended share quotation and a parliamentary motion signed by more than 50 MPs regretting his threat.

If the Co-operative movement thought itself invulnerable before, because of the complexities of its structures, that can no longer be the case. It has very little going for it.

As a business, it is performing poorly for its members, with the Co-op Bank and the CIS insurance company (the two most sensitive businesses in terms of the regulators), the jewels among the low-producing assets.

The discovery of possible unethical behaviour, over a period of time dating back to 1994, when the CWS sold off its food production arm, undermines the claims to special status.

If the last 18 years of Conservative rule have taught British business anything, it is that mutually owned businesses have to be competitive if they are to survive independently — ask Scottish Amicable. In the case of the Co-op Bank, it needs the ability to raise capital.

Lanica may never unlock the key to the CWS for itself. But an increasingly isolated Mr Melmoth, with only Warburgs on his side, must decide how to get the best cash deal for the whole movement.

Fraud busting

TIME for a truce in the war of words between City and Wall Street law enforcers, sparked by a report this week, in these pages, of comments by Manhattan assistant district attorney John Moscow.

Rarely does an article previewing a regulatory symposium at Serjeant's Inn have such inflammatory effect; nevertheless, the blaze has illuminated important disagreements between the Square Mile and the County of New York, disagreements usually smothered beneath a layer of officialese.

To recap, Mr Moscow said dishonest New York bankers were avoiding the US money-laundering crackdown by routeing dirty deals through London. He did not criticise British bankers *per se*, but those City bankers of whatever nationality who "ask-no-questions".

City of London Police were outraged; Mr Moscow was, they said, talking through his hat (less polite reaction had Mr Moscow as a bat-manufacturer of the Lewis Carroll variety).

All very puzzling for those who assume that Anglo-Saxon financial markets are policed by ideological blood-brothers, sharing broadly similar outlooks. Mr Moscow's view — that the City is (a) complacent, (b) insufficiently proactive in chasing black money and (c) unappreciative of the moral dimension to banking — is far from his alone.

From the City, the US approach can seem both hyperbolic (handcuffs, 300-year jail terms) and driven by geo-politics (the US was prepared to grant the biggest crook in history, Abbas Gokal, immunity from prosecution).

Perhaps all parties should bury the hatchet at the April 29 seminar, if not at Serjeant's Inn then at one of the hostelries nearby.

Taking Names

LLOYD'S of London's is unquestionably expert at stirring things up. So it should be no surprise that the publication of its proposals, aimed at strengthening its financial security, immediately sparked cries of foul from the Names.

The proposals require the Names to deposit significantly more money than they do at present to remain members of the market. Many Names believe Lloyd's wants them to leave so that the market can be taken over by the limited liability corporate capital vehicles.

The Names also argue that if the deposit limits are being raised for them, they should also be raised for the corporates. Lloyd's believes that the corporate levels are already higher than those required for individuals. It also says that higher risk corporates already pay higher deposits accordingly.

The important issue is not the nitty-gritty of the proposals themselves — after all, it could be argued that it was high time Lloyd's upped its deposit limits — but the poor way in which it has been handled.

Despite its protestations to the contrary, the impression given is that Lloyd's is not seriously questioning the financial security of the corporates. If the plans trigger a public row with the Names, who still provide 56 per cent of its capital base, the world will know that all is far from mended at Lime Street. That could prove highly damaging for business.

Flotation will put £126m price tag on Aston Villa

Chairman to pick up £4m when starting whistle blows on trading, says IAN KING

DOUG Ellis, chairman of Aston Villa, will see his stake in the Premier League football club valued at £42 million when it comes to market on May 7.

Mr Ellis, who bought his stake for an estimated £425,000, will also collect just under £4 million from the flotation, in which he is cutting his stake from 47 per cent to 33.4 per cent.

Original investors who bought shares at £5 a time in April 1969 will receive £1,200 for each share, although Villa has still to trace 646 of them.

In all, Villa — the 16th British football club to float — will be valued at £125.9 million, making it the fourth-biggest club, behind Manchester United, Newcastle United and Chelsea.

But fans will need to invest at least £440 if they want to buy shares, which will be valued at £11 each, while Villa's 20,000 season ticket-holders will get priority. The issue has already been three times oversubscribed by financial institutions.

Villa, currently fifth in the Premier League and in line for a place in next season's Uefa Cup, expect to raise £15.2 million from the flotation.

Mr Ellis said the proceeds would be spent on increasing capacity at the club's Villa Park stadium and on erecting two huge video screens at the ground, while the balance would be used to buy new players.

However, Mr Ellis warned that Villa would continue to be run on conservative lines, with any future player purchases being funded from operating profits.

Forecasting pre-tax profits of £5 million for the current financial year, before transfer fees, he described Villa as a club run "with an eye to cash".

He added: "This is a business that has been run as a business not as a fantasy, and I think it is fair to say that we have possibly the best balance sheet you could look at."

Mr Ellis, nicknamed "Deadly Doug" because of his supposed penchant for sacking managers, said he expected several of Villa's players to apply for shares.

He went on: "I go into the dressing room before every match, to wish the lads luck, but all they want to know is how many shares they can put in for."

Mr Ellis also announced that Villa would raise season ticket prices by 14 per cent this year, with other prices rising by about £1.

He said Villa's ticket prices were among the lowest in the Premier League, and there had been no increase for the past two seasons.

HoF loses in 'crap' game

Julia Finch

IN AN admission redolent of Gerald Ratner in his heyday, the struggling stores group House of Fraser yesterday said it had millions of pounds worth of "crap" stock on its shelves — with more to come.

The group, which includes stores such as Rackhams, Frasers, Army & Navy and Barkers of Kensington, is cutting the price of the goods, which it is contracted to take delivery of, but still finds sales hard to achieve.

The group's admission is reminiscent of the episode that sparked the decline of Ratners, when chairman Gerald Ratner said that some items in his jewellery stores were "total crap".

HoF chief executive John Coleman was asked yesterday if he was saying that House of Fraser was "contracted to buy crap". Mr Coleman replied: "In a word, yes."

But he was horrified that his comments should be viewed in the same way as Mr Ratner's. He emphasised that the "inappropriate goods" on his shelves were bought "with the best intentions".

Even at a price discount of 80 per cent, however, the goods were not selling.

The extent of the problem emerged as House of Fraser reported it had plunged into the red for the first time since its flotation three years ago. Profits of £14.8 million turned into a loss of £38.4 million after one-off costs of £53.2 million. Some £22 million of that is the bill to get rid of the bad stock. Before the exceptional charge, profits were ahead 6 per cent.

House of Fraser has had a disappointing run since its stock market float but Mr Coleman has brought in a new top management team to turn the group around.

One aim is to get shoppers spending less in the stores' concession outlets and more on HoF own-bought goods, which are more profitable.

The group is targeting stock better and will introduce a new private label in June, backed by TV advertising, to bridge the gap between high street stores such as Next and expensive designer labels.

HoF recently opened its first new shop in five years, in Swindon, and four more are planned. Together they will create some 1,000 new jobs. Earlier this year the company shed 1,000 administrative jobs and announced plans to close three stores, in Eastbourne, Scunthorpe and Sheffield.

Smokey futures

Mark Tran in New York

DISCORD yesterday broke out among tobacco plaintiffs' lawyers at the prospect of a comprehensive settlement in which cigarette companies would pay as much as $300 billion over 25 years in exchange for immunity from future lawsuits.

Stanley Rosenblatt, a plaintiffs' lawyer in Miami, vowed to fight any law enacted by Congress that would protect the tobacco giants from future litigation. "You bet your life I would challenge it," he said. "Generally, whenever the tobacco industry has negotiated in smoke-filled rooms, it has ripped off the public."

Mr Rosenblatt's suit on behalf of 60,000 current and former flight attendants claiming job injuries from second-hand smoke is set to go trial in Miami in June.

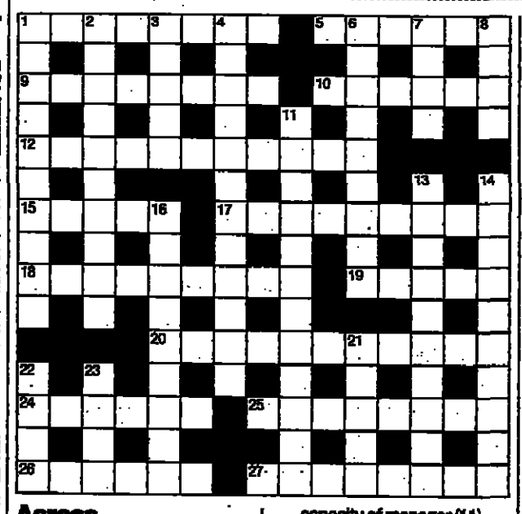
Democratic senators, meanwhile, sent a letter to President Clinton urging him to "maintain a healthy scepticism" about any proposed settlement and impose "very stringent conditions." Such negative reaction underlines the enormous difficulty of pushing through such a deal, which would require legislation in Congress.

In the event of a deal in the US, Philip Morris and other tobacco giants would not be protected from the growing number of lawsuits outside America. Analysts said that a settlement in the US would provide the impetus to other governments to strike their own deal with American tobacco companies. "Foreign governments would want a piece of the same deal," said Ken Shea of credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's. Only 8 per cent of the world's cigarettes are smoked in the US.

While the $300 billion figure sounds enormous, the cigarette companies could easily cope with that sum by booting the price of a cigarette packet by 25 cents. With the average pack costing less than $2 (£1.20), another 25 cents is not expected to deter most smokers. Most analysts believe that the $300 billion figure is an opening bargaining position from the anti-tobacco lobby and expect a final figure to be considerably lower.

Guardian Crossword No 20,941

Set by Araucaria



Across

1 Those responsible for removals from office pressed changes about its opening (8)
5 Tease the church, not the voluntary movement? (6)
9 11 and don't 14 27, he said (2,3,3)
10 22 officer? (6)
12 Previous form in the Southern Railway in the capacity of manager (11)
15 For a bear, turn to the dismembered USSR (5)
17 Roman French approaching Greek city in peninsular campaign (9)
18 Sleeping partner? (9)
19 Servitude before liberty begins for the rustic (5)
20 How the Gardens in 1859 gave way to bowling at the Oval? (8,3)
24 Cricketers with many names like Harold and Marie? (6)
25 Roll 5 around: spillage will result (8)
26 Hobson's choice of two strings: after one of 24, 9's mutual friend (6)
27 Coming to be passed through (2,3,3)

Down

1 Member's first question among experts will fizzle out (4,6)
2 Supply lines from here, performed quickly by the team (6,4)
3 Broken feeds at the Passover meal (5)
4 Speaking volumes? Right, with setting and dialogue (7,5)
6 Spooner's Berbie's rival, clever and amusing Chicago (5,4)
7 Ford needs fuel: 9 was horny-handed (4)
8 American name for some wool (4)
11 Take second place in military progress from novel half 2 (6,3,3)
13 Acceptable vicar that's in front as a guide to the first of 4 (4,6)
14 Divine about former cricket manager and colleague — can't make up my mind (5-5)
16 Very small friend; record holder on track (6-3)
21 Tree derived from poplar, chestnut, and others (5)
22 Can't keep up with Iris (4)
23 Exploring game (4)

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